

REPORTAGE / POLITICS

All in the Family

The American Sangh's affair with Tulsi Gabbard

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ERIC BARADAT / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

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TULSI GABBARD, a United States Congresswoman, entered the historic First Unitarian Church of Los Angeles to the strains of Marvin Gaye's "Ain't No Mountain High Enough." She shook hands with her cheering fans, leaped on stage with a smile, accepted a garland of white flowers from a supporter, folded her hands in greeting and said, "Aloha." It was a sunny Saturday morning in March 2019, and she was campaigning for the Democratic Party's nomination for president. Addressing an animated crowd of hundreds, she urged them to "stand together." The 38-year-old representative for Hawaii's second congressional district, who frequently refers to herself as a "Karma Yogi," declared that the nation is divided. "What we are seeing is this dark shadow caused by a corruption of spirit that is ruling our land," she warned—a clear reference to the polarisation of Trump's America.

Gabbard called for a range of changes in domestic policies: fixing a broken healthcare system, reforming criminal justice, providing affordable housing and addressing the climate crisis. Reckoning with the “cost of war,” she said, is central to carrying out this vision of change. As a major in the US Army National Guard—a reserve component of the US armed forces—and a veteran of the war in Iraq, she denounced “wasteful regime-change war policies.” America’s foreign policy, she argued, is creating a new Cold War that puts it at “greater risk of nuclear catastrophe than ever before in history.”

Outside the venue, around two dozen people had gathered to protest. They were neither irate protestors opposing her domestic policies nor activists angered by her stance on America’s wars. They were people such as Baljit Kumar, a young Dalit refugee residing in nearby Riverside. “She supports the people I ran from in India,” Kumar told me. Claiming that Gabbard’s congressional campaign financing is heavily augmented by American affiliates of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh—the parent organisation of India’s ruling Bharatiya Janata Party—protestors held bold red, white and blue signs proclaiming her “Prince\$\$ of the R\$\$.” Since 2015, a handful of articles in online Western media outlets have speculated about Gabbard’s perceived closeness to the Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi, and the BJP.

The mood inside the hall was different. As she concluded her speech, the crowd chanted: “Tulsi! Tulsi!” The emcee, Jimmy Dore—a comedian who hosts a popular YouTube show, and is a Gabbard supporter—opened the floor up for questions. As hands went up all around, he pointed to me. Aware that my prepared question was about to strike a discordant tone, I removed my hat and glasses.

“It is getting serious,” Gabbard joked.

“In your first two terms in office, you met the RSS spokesperson at least three times,” I said. “You spoke at many RSS events, including two in India. When did your collaboration with the RSS begin and how much money have they given you?”

The usually unflappable Gabbard, who speaks with slow deliberation, grimaced. She paused long enough for an audience member to shout, “Speak up.” Finally she responded. “I am a soldier, and I took an oath,” she began. “One oath in my

life. That was an oath to serve and protect this country, to put my life on the line for the people of this country.”

She grew more emphatic. “We stand for aloha. We stand for diversity. We stand for peace and bringing people together around these shared ideals of freedom and opportunity for all people.” Gesturing to the audience to stand, she continued, “Thank you everybody for standing with me. It is this kind of attacks that are rooted in religious bigotry that we must stand together and condemn. Whether these attacks are being targeted at Hindus, or Buddhists, or Muslims, or Jews, or atheists, or Catholics, we must stand united and condemn this hate and bigotry because an attack against one of us is an attack against all of us.” Again, the crowd chanted, “Tulsi, Tulsi.”

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Tulsi Gabbard, who visited India on the personal invitation of Narendra Modi, has played a significant part in rehabilitating his image in the United States. VIJAY VERMA / PTI

This is typical of how Gabbard responds to questions about the depth of her relationship with Modi, her association with affiliates of the Sangh Parivar—the family of organisations working with the RSS—or the identity of many of her key donors. Such queries are dismissed as signs of “Hinduphobia.” When an article in *The Intercept* described her as “a rising progressive star, despite her support for Hindu nationalists,” Gabbard lashed out with an opinion piece for *Religion News Service*, headlined: “Religious bigotry is un-American.” She said her critics were “trying to foment anti-Hindu sentiment.”

Yet, as they say, the devil is in the details.

TULSI GABBARD IS NOT OF INDIAN ORIGIN, but identifies as a Hindu. She has visited India only once—in 2014, on the personal invitation of Narendra Modi. And yet, before she was even elected to office, she promised to be “a strong voice in Congress for improving India–US relations.” When she won a seat in the US House of Representatives in 2012, she made history as the first Hindu ever elected to the chamber. At the outset of her first term, she joined the House India Caucus—a coalition of representatives who support pro-India policies. She now co-chairs the body.

Now, Gabbard hopes to make history in the 2020 election by becoming the first female president. At present, she is a dark horse in the race. She is lagging in the Democratic primaries—internal elections to choose the party's nominee for the presidency—and has to battle high-profile contenders such as Kamala Harris, Joe Biden, Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders.

Gabbard has perhaps the most peculiar personal history of any candidate running. Born in American Samoa, and raised in Hawaii by a Catholic father and a practising Hindu mother, she was primarily homeschooled. Her parents oversaw a Hare Krishna splinter group called the Science of Identity Foundation, and the family campaigned intensely against gay marriage. She was immersed in the Bhagavad Gita, and kept her childhood copy of it with her when she was deployed as a medical administrator to Iraq. Later, she gifted the same copy to Modi.

Gabbard's critical take on the United States' interventionism and its offshore wars is unpopular with Washington's defence lobbyists—and the sort of issue on which primaries are almost never contested. Nevertheless, it has won her support that cuts across party lines and ideologies. She appeals to wide-ranging constituencies: libertarians to socialists, “War on Terror” hawks to white supremacists, Trump supporters to Sanders supporters, and the Hindu diaspora. Gabbard's manner is measured; her words seem carefully chosen. Her eloquence, poise and ability to stay on point broaden her appeal.

Gabbard's rise in US politics came out of nowhere, and is inexplicable until one considers how Sangh donations gave her a leg up when she was a virtual unknown. The first Indian-American donors to her first congressional campaign

—who were also among the first non-Hawaiians to support her—are top executives in RSS affiliates in the United States. Donor names provided in filings to the Federal Election Commission, which I collated with lists from Sangh websites and promotional materials as well as media reports, reveal that hundreds of leaders and members of such groups gave hundreds of thousands of dollars to Gabbard in the formative years of her congressional career. Kallie Keith-Agaran, a Democratic activist in Hawaii, has also compiled a database of Gabbard's donors. Her extensive documentation of their contributions and affiliations closely corroborates my independent findings.

Gabbard emerged on the US political scene at a pivotal moment for the Sangh's aspiration to see Modi as the Indian prime minister. Since 2002, Modi and the RSS had both grown increasingly controversial in the United States, facing protests by academics as well as censure by the US government. Modi stood accused of complicity in the anti-Muslim pogrom that had taken place in Gujarat, while he was the chief minister of the state. Even by conservative estimates, the pogrom took over a thousand lives. Afterwards, he was denied a visa to the country. The greatest diplomatic triumph for the American Sangh was rehabilitating Modi's tainted reputation in the United States. Gabbard played a significant part in that project.

There are nearly 4.5 million Indian Americans in the United States. Just over half are Hindu. Fifty percent are registered Democrats, but they tend to shy away from partisanship—especially those who belong to Sangh offshoots. Constituting less than 1.5 percent of the population, Indian Americans are not typically considered a significant voter base. Yet they have emerged as a crucial constituency for Indian politics, given their vast support for Modi at his “rock-star” receptions in New York and California, and his dependence on them for “diaspora diplomacy.”



Gabbard is a major in the US Army National Guard—a reserve component of the US armed forces—and is a veteran of the war in Iraq. HUGH GENTRY / REUTERS

Amongst Gabbard's many donors are various members of the US chapters of groups such as the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, the Overseas Friends of the BJP and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America. Thanks to her connection to leading figures of the American Sangh—such as Vijay Pallod, a businessman from Texas; Bharat Barai, an oncologist from the Chicago region; and Mihir Meghani, a physician from California—she has been eagerly welcomed at many Sangh fundraisers around the country.

“She has proved it at a young age that she is a capable leader,” Barai told me. “When a capable Hindu candidate will contest, sure, I look at it favourably. But, of course, I don't vote for every Hindu candidate. They also have to be capable.” Pallod told me he liked Gabbard because she was a “moderate” and seemed genuine. “She is not like many politicians who do not keep their word,” he said.

Even as mainstream interfaith groups refused to participate in events hosted by the American Sangh, Gabbard repeatedly spoke at its events, in the United States and abroad. While organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have published reports warning about the spread of Hindu-nationalist violence under Modi's administration, Gabbard has called India an

“indispensable partner” to the United States, and pushed for enhanced cooperation between the two countries. Gabbard's donors have publicly applauded her for supporting Modi before he was elected, for speaking against the US decision to deny him a visa after 2002 and for working against congressional efforts to recognise human-rights violations in India.

Tulsi Gabbard began her six years in office as a liberal Democrat. She is now closely aligned with the progressive wing of the Democratic party, and is campaigning for president with rhetoric about peace and diversity. Yet by the end of her first term, one Indian paper was describing her as “the RSS fraternity’s newest mascot.” Few in the United States realise that Gabbard's relationship with the RSS does not agree at all with the progressive image she cultivates. The RSS, as a mainspring of Hindu nationalism, is an organisation that pushes a regressive ideology at odds with a multicultural society. It campaigns for a homogenous, hegemonic culture it hopes will turn India into a Hindu State, in which minorities such as Muslims and Christians will, at best, be second-class citizens.

“The Sangh in America backed Tulsi Gabbard because they understand that the international community is increasingly worried about the sectarian violent politics of the Sangh in India,” Ashok Swain, a professor of peace and conflict studies at Sweden’s Uppsala University, told me. “They want some powerful political personalities on their side, particularly in the United States. They believe Tulsi can be one of them, who can provide them cover from international sanctions. Tulsi has also done that in the past.”

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ONE DAY IN THE SPRING OF 2015, Tulsi Gabbard was the centre of attention. Some three hundred guests gathered outside the Kahalu’u Fishpond on the Hawaiian island of Oahu to witness her wedding to Abraham Williams. Dressed in a royal-blue lehnga choli, she walked down the aisle alongside her father, the Hawaiian state senator Mike Gabbard. Abraham, wearing a white suit, stood waiting for her at the altar. By his side stood Vinod Dave, the pandit who was to perform the traditional Vedic ceremony. Tulsi’s mother, Carol, also stood waiting—as did India’s acting ambassador to the United States at the time, Taranjit Sandhu, and Ram Madhav, who was then a BJP spokesperson and is now a national general secretary of the party. Prior to his appointment as party

spokesperson a year earlier, Madhav had served as the national spokesperson for the RSS for over ten years.

During the ceremony, Madhav took the stage to convey Narendra Modi's personal greetings. "All of us here share the happiness of your family and loved ones on this important day," he read from Modi's letter. "On behalf of our prime minister, I invite the newly-wed couple to celebrate their honeymoon in the land of devas," he added. He then delivered gifts from Modi—a pashmina shawl and a Ganesh statuette.

It was an illustrious delegation for a junior congresswoman. Gabbard had just begun her second term in January 2015. She had also just returned from a three-week tour of India, where she met Modi, half a dozen cabinet ministers and the chief of the army staff.

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On 9 April 2015, Ram Madhav, then a BJP spokesperson, and before that, a long time RSS executive, delivered gifts to Tulsi Gabbard from Modi on her wedding day.

The month before her wedding, she had begun hinting at presidential ambitions. Described by *The Atlantic* as a "rising star" of the Democratic Party, she disagreed that there was "little hope for a Hindu in the Oval Office in our lifetimes." Arguing that spiritual practice is not a credential for a presidential candidate, she concluded, "People are looking for someone they can trust."

Modi, meanwhile, was looking to recruit members of the Indian-American diaspora to his unofficial diplomatic corps. “We are changing the contours of diplomacy and looking at new ways of strengthening India’s interests abroad,” Madhav told the *Washington Post* in February 2015. “They can be India’s voice even while being loyal citizens in those countries. That is the long-term goal behind the diaspora diplomacy.”

Two people whom Modi has long relied on to be “India’s voice” in America—or, some might argue, the Sangh Parivar’s voice—joined Madhav as guests at Gabbard’s wedding. Ramesh Bhutada and his relative Vijay Pallod made the eight-hour flight from Texas with their wives, as well as Bhutada’s son, Rishi, and Rishi’s wife and son. Ramesh, Vijay and Rishi had all been generous donors to Gabbard’s congressional campaigns since before her first election, in 2012.

Years before Madhav articulated Modi’s concept of diaspora diplomacy, the RSS had embraced a similar idea. In December 2010 in Pune, the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh—the RSS’s international wing—held a Vishwa Sangh Shibir, a quinquennial summit of HSS members from 35 countries. “Hindus abroad should act as cultural ambassadors of Bharat, and the HSS has been working in that direction,” Mohan Bhagwat, the *sarsanghchalak*—supreme leader—of the RSS, said during a farewell address. “This country alone has the capacity to save the world and humanity from the impending dangers.” Bhutada and Pallod were in the audience.

Dressed in the traditional RSS uniform of khaki shorts, white shirts and black caps, the two Houstonians posed for pictures with the founder of the HSS, Jagdish Chandra Sharda. In his nineties and confined to a wheelchair, Sharda travelled from Canada just to speak at the camp. His memoirs portray his life as part of “the story of Sangh expansion overseas, specially the first steps of Hindu philosophy as a social movement outside Bharat.” When Sharda died in 2017, Bhutada, speaking in his capacity as the vice-president of the US chapter of the HSS, eulogised him as “the first one to start Sangh *shakha*”—branches—“outside of India.”

When KB Hedgewar founded the RSS, in 1925, he explained that “the Sangh wants to put in reality the words ‘Hindustan of Hindus,’” which he compared to a “Germany of Germans.” Hedgewar’s mentor, BS Moonje, reached out to the

Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. In 1931, he travelled to Italy to tour institutions run by the National Fascist Party. Professing himself “much impressed” by the “fascist organisations,” he declared, “Every aspiring and growing nation needs such organisations. India needs them most.” In 1939, just before replacing Hedgewar as RSS chief, MS Golwalkar praised Nazi Germany’s racial policies as “a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and profit by.” Soon, however, the RSS decided it had something of its own to offer the world.

In 1946, Sharda was a young teacher of Sanskrit and Hindi in Amritsar. An irregular member of the RSS since his teens, he began participating in earnest after attending an officers’ training camp in 1942. After the Second World War ended, he accepted a teaching position in British-occupied Kenya. In his *Memoirs of a Global Hindu*, Sharda writes that his “Sangh colleagues” were upset at the news that he was leaving at that “crucial juncture”—just before Partition—but did not want him to miss the opportunity. “I also promised them that wherever I go, Sangh will go with me; and wherever I went, I would organize Sangh work.”

During the rough voyage to Kenya, he was comforted after spotting a fellow passenger wearing the “khaki half-pants of Sangh.” As the two gathered others to join in community activities, their number swelled to 17, all of whom identified as RSS *swayamsevaks*—volunteers. “The first Sangh shakha outside Bharat was held on board the ship S.S. Vasna in September 1946,” he writes. In 1947, as he settled into life in Kenya, Sharda founded the Sangh’s first permanent international branch.

Sangh activists demolished the Babri Masjid in 1992, setting off communal violence across India. The same year, LK Advani decided that the BJP needed a global presence. He founded the Overseas Friends of the BJP, to help project “a positive and correct image.”

Eventually known as the HSS, Sharda's new organisation followed the same ideology as the RSS. Its purpose, Sharda writes, was to unite and organise a community, which “possessed all the qualities of a highly civilized and cultured

society, except for the stark absence of unity, discipline, organizational qualities and assertiveness.” His comments reflected the Sangh’s shifting rhetoric. In the mid 1960s, shortly after founding the Vishva Hindu Parishad to serve as the RSS’s religious wing, Golwalkar remarked, “The average man of this country was at one time incomparably superior to the average man of the other lands.” He hoped the Sangh would return India—or, rather, the Hindu community—to that golden age of superiority. As the Sangh expanded internationally, it stopped looking to the outside world for inspiration and instead began insisting that the outside world should look to India and its culture for inspiration.

Ian Hall, a deputy director of Griffith University’s Asia Institute and the author of a forthcoming book on Modi’s foreign policy, told me that the ideological concept of a superior Hindu culture motivated the Sangh’s international expansion. Hall called the expansion “part and parcel of spreading the word.” According to him, “The Sangh are convinced that, one day, the world will come to appreciate the wisdom of the sanatana dharma, which is wisdom for the world, not just for India.”

By the 1960s, Sangh branches had sprouted up in many erstwhile British colonies—from Kenya to Myanmar, Hong Kong, Mauritius and elsewhere. Decolonisation prompted emigration, and many Indians living in the newly liberated countries moved to the United Kingdom. In 1966, Sharda inaugurated the UK’s first HSS branch. Meantime, across the ocean, changes in immigration law soon opened the doors for Indians to immigrate to the United States.

Asian immigration to the United States was severely restricted before Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. At the height of the civil-rights movement, the United States scrapped its racially oriented quota system in favour of one giving preference to highly skilled immigrants. Around twelve thousand Indians a year began entering the country. New arrivals included Ramesh Bhutada, who emigrated in the late 1960s, just as the Sangh was taking root in American soil.

In 1969, Modi’s friend Mahesh Mehta emigrated to New York from Gujarat—where the two shared a mentor and attended the same RSS shakha. Upon arrival, Mehta, an RSS *pracharak*—fulltime worker—immediately established the first

Sangh organisation in the United States. Officially founded in 1970, the VHP of America was the VHP's first overseas branch.

Bhutada was not yet involved. Although his father was an RSS officer in Maharashtra, an *IndoAmerican News* profile explains the son “never understood RSS properly and was busy in his studies.” That changed when HSS-USA was founded, in 1977. Sharad Amin, described by the *India Herald* as a leader with “vast experience” in the HSS and VHPA, told the newspaper that Houston's first HSS shakha began in Bhutada's house. Ever since, he has been a cornerstone of the American Sangh.

In 1981—the year Tulsi Gabbard was born—Bhutada partnered with Jugal Malani, his brother-in-law, to found Star Pipe Products. It developed as a family business. Bhutada soon hired another relative: his wife's cousin Vijay Pallod, who had recently arrived in America. As they settled into Houston, Pallod and his wife briefly moved into Bhutada's home. “I saw a steady stream of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh workers giving time and energy to worthy causes,” he told *Indo-American News*. One of those was Bhagwat himself, someone, Pallod told me, he continues to admire. According to him, Bhagwat is not the hardliner RSS chief his predecessor, KS Sudershan, was. “He speaks in a very different tone,” Pallod said.

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In December 2010 in Pune, the HSS held a Vishwa Sangh Shibir, a quinquennial summit of HSS members from 35 countries, in which its founder, Jagdish Sharda, spoke. Ramesh Bhutada and Vijay

Pallod, prominent leaders of the American Sangh and Gabbard's earliest campaign donors, travelled from Houston to attend it.

Pallod gained more than an employer in Bhutada. “Yes, we are cousins by marriage,” he told me, “but more than that, he is my mentor.” After Bhutada introduced him to the Indian-American community, Pallod soon became an active social worker.

The American Sangh grew more firmly rooted throughout the 1980s. In Houston, the VHPA and HSS partnered to begin hosting youth camps to, as Amin writes, keep children from “losing touch with Hindu culture.” In India, the RSS pracharaks Atal Bihari Vajpayee and LK Advani founded the BJP. Modi, also an RSS pracharak, was assigned to help build the new party. In Hawaii, Gabbard's parents began working for a state senator while running a school. In 1988, the former swayamsevak Vinod Prakash, who emigrated to the United States in the 1960s, founded the India Development and Relief Fund in the state of Maryland. Pallod eventually joined the charity as a vice-president, while Bhutada became a major donor and advisor to it.

The 1990s brought more direct Sangh engagement with the growing diaspora. In 1990, the HSS held its first Vishwa Sangh Shibir, in Bengaluru. “Here, we deliberate on the present and future of Hindu society living outside Bharat,” Sharda writes. On the international stage, the BJP was receiving negative press after joining the VHP's militant campaign to destroy the historic Babri Masjid, which it claimed stood on the birthplace of the Hindu icon Ram.

Sangh activists, watched by Advani, demolished the mosque in 1992, setting off communal violence across India. The same year, Advani decided that the party needed a global presence. So he founded the Overseas Friends of the BJP, to help project “a positive and correct image” and “correct any distortions in the media's reporting of current events taking place in India.” As Vijay Jolly, who was the chief of the BJP's foreign-affairs cell, later explained, the group intended to “indoctrinate” the diaspora “with the BJP ideology.”

“Until the 1990s, there was often a sense of resentment towards those who had left India, especially the highly educated, as they took skills and know-how out of the country, leaving it—in principle at least—poorer,” Hall told me. “But in the early 1990s, views changed, and the diaspora began to be seen as a potential

resource—an untapped well of funds that might be invested in India, in particular.” In 1993, shortly after the destruction of the Babri Masjid, the former BJP president Murli Manohar Joshi travelled to the United States to explore this resource.

Modi joined Joshi. During the tour, the 42-year-old Modi visited several American Sangh activists. One was the Houston-based Ramesh Shah, a friend of Bhutada and Pallod who emigrated from Gujarat in 1970. In Indiana, Modi stayed in the home of Bharat Barai, the physician, who emigrated from Maharashtra in 1974. On a second trip, in 1997, Modi again stayed with Barai and breakfasted with Amrit Mittal of Illinois, another friend of Bhutada who had emigrated from Punjab in 1971. All three were long-time leaders of the VHPA.

In 1998, Tulsi Gabbard was just 17 years old and stepping into the world of politics. It was a pivotal year for her and India, as the BJP came to power for the first time. In the United States, the VHPA’s structure took shape, with a governing council of over fifty elected members, who included Mahesh Mehta, Bharat Barai, Vijay Pallod, Ramesh Shah’s daughter Sonal, and a young physician named Mihir Meghani.

Meghani, born in Pennsylvania to immigrant parents, grew up in Michigan with an affinity for the Sangh. As a medical student in his early twenties, he attended the 1995 Vishwa Sangh Shibir in Baroda. He returned to India the following year for a clinical rotation in Shillong that, according to him, was arranged by two pracharaks—one of whom was Sunil Deodhar. Now a BJP national secretary, Deodhar made his mark as Modi’s campaign manager in 2014.

Meghani was already making his own mark on the BJP in 1998. The party, on its website, under a section about its philosophy, featured his essay: “Hindutva: The Great Nationalist Ideology.” Meghani later explained that it “reflected my personal thoughts on the Hindu nationalist movement that was sweeping India.” Praising the RSS, VHP and BJP for increasing “pride in being a Hindu,” he proclaimed the coming of a “Hindu awakening” that “will go down as one of the most monumental events in the history of the world.” Describing the sixteenth-century Babri Masjid—built under Mughal rule—as a “dilapidated symbol of foreign dominance,” he applauded the mobs that destroyed it for releasing “thousands of years of anger and shame, so diligently bottled up.” Despite the

thousands of Muslim deaths in the riots, he declared, “It is up to the government and the Muslim leadership whether they wish to increase Hindu furore.”

With the HSS, VHPA and OFBJP, the Sangh now had international social, religious and political wings. The IDRF served as an economic wing. In 2000, Ramesh Shah founded the Ekal Vidyalaya Foundation of USA as the international counterpart of the VHP’s project of single-teacher schools. Speaking to an Indian magazine, a swayamsevak working as an Ekal teacher explained, “The teachers are selected only if they subscribe to the RSS way of thought.” A VHP spokesperson later told a media outlet that Ekal does “not mind even Muslim or Christian students learning in our institutions,” as long as they accept that “they are by birth Hindus.”

Modi, meanwhile, was a rising star. In 2001, he was appointed the chief minister of Gujarat—his first ever political office. Months later, in 2002, the anti-Muslim pogrom broke out across the state in the wake of the Godhra train fire. Allegations that Modi mishandled the government’s response swiftly tarnished his global reputation even as they scored him political points in Gujarat. According to some, Modi sanctioned the violence. BJP state legislators participated in it, and were later convicted for their role in it. The VHP leader Ashok Singhal reportedly called the carnage a “successful experiment which will be repeated all over the country.” Elsewhere, in Hawaii, Tulsi Gabbard was running for the state legislature—her own first political office—while the Sangh was sparking a scandal in the mainland United States.

The controversy began in November 2002, when the Mumbai-based Sabrang Communications released a report calling the IDRF “a major conduit of funds for Hindutva organisations in India.” The report accused the group of operating under US laws granting tax-exempt status to charitable organisations in order to raise money—nearly four million dollars in total—for the Sangh. It concluded, “That IDRF supports Sangh organizations in India is thus not a matter of accident but is instead the very purpose for its existence.” This conclusion agreed with Hall’s opinion that “the Sangh internationalised essentially to build political influence among an influential group of people—the diaspora—and to tap them for funds.”

Pallod condemned the allegations as “falsehoods packaged by propagandists masquerading as concerned citizens.” A counter-report denounced the attempt to malign organisations such as the VHP and RSS and thanked Meghani “of the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh” for serving as a resource. Yet the damage was done. Several corporations, including Cisco Systems and Oracle Corporation, suspended their gift-matching programmes with the IDRF; the US Justice Department launched an investigation; and media across the world reported the news.

In 2003, Bhutada co-founded Sewa USA as a counterpart to Sewa Bharati—one of the Sangh groups named as recipients of IDRF financing. That same year, Meghani co-founded the Hindu American Foundation, an advocacy group that Gabbard later said she is in touch with, “if not on a daily basis, probably a weekly basis.”

In 2005, the US State Department denied Modi a visa to address a convention of the Asian American Hotel Owners Association in Florida. David Mulford, then the US ambassador to India, said Modi was responsible for a “comprehensive failure” to control the 2002 violence. Akshay Desai, a host of the convention and a seasoned Republican fundraiser, protested to the administration of George W Bush that the denial made Hindus “feel humiliated.” Calling it the “height of diplomatic arrogance,” Ram Madhav told an Indian newspaper that the US government “should know that it will not get away with this.”

A leaked diplomatic cable from 2006 reveals that Madhav further warned the US embassy in Delhi that “Modi’s ascendancy is not a question of if but when.” Determined to assist in that ascent, Bharat Barai organised a May 2007 videoconference for Modi to address the diaspora. Despite a recently published sting operation in which Sangh members such as the Shiv Sena’s Babu Bajrangi and the VHP leader Anil Patel boasted that Modi sanctioned the 2002 violence, Ramesh Shah organised a December rally in Houston to celebrate Modi’s re-election to a third term as Gujarat’s chief minister. Barai’s loyalty remained unwavering—he made the videoconferences a biennial event.

Scandal, however, was sweeping the Sangh in India too. Anti-Christian riots erupted in Odisha’s Kandhamal district during Christmas celebrations in 2007, and again in August 2008. The RSS, VHP and BJP were all implicated in the

attacks. Madhav reportedly turned to a surprising source for assistance: an American named Michael Brannon Parker, who—an activist who did not want to be named told me—was allegedly hired to write a book detailing the Sangh’s version of events.

Parker was raised in the International Society for Krishna Consciousness—popularly known as the Hare Krishna movement. His parents were personally initiated by ISKCON’s founder, Swami Prabhupada. Parker settled in Hawaii in 1985, apparently befriending the Gabbard family. In a 2015 interview, he said he had known Tulsi Gabbard “since she was a young girl.” After unsuccessfully running for the state legislature, he began repeatedly visiting India, where he encountered the RSS. “I’ve been working with them since 2001,” he claimed in the interview.

The American Sangh, meanwhile, was weathering its own crisis. After Barack Obama was elected president, in November 2008, he announced a transition team for his new administration. Among its members was the economist Sonal Shah—the daughter of Ramesh Shah and a former governing-council member of the VHPA. Within days, news of her Sangh links spread across the world. The news channel *France24*, for instance, published the headline, “Obama’s Indian’ slammed with extremist accusations.” Shah initially denied any association with the VHPA, but later acknowledged and formally renounced it. “I would not have associated” with the VHPA, she said, had she foreseen the VHP’s role in the 2002 violence or anticipated that the VHPA “could possibly stand by silently in the face of its Indian counterpart’s complicity.”

Her father felt no such compulsion to disassociate. Just two years later, Ramesh Shah joined Sharad Amin, Vijay Pallod, Ramesh Bhutada and other Sangh activists from Houston to attend the Vishwa Sangh Shibir in Pune. At the inaugural session, flanked by other Sangh executives, the VHP chief Ashok Singhal sat centre stage, beneath garlanded pictures of KB Hedgewar and MS Golwalkar, the RSS’s founding fathers.

The American Sangh leaders returned to Houston in January 2011. Undaunted by the setbacks of the previous years, they began preparations to support the BJP’s electoral goals from abroad. Then, in May, a 30-year-old Tulsi Gabbard announced her candidacy for the US Congress.

{THREE}

TULSI GABBARD WAS BORN ON 12 APRIL 1981 to Mike and Carol, in the US territory of American Samoa. She was the fourth of five children. The family moved to Hawaii in 1983. “I’m guessing they moved to be closer to Chris Butler,” Sina, Mike’s elder sister, told me. Butler is the founder of the Science of Identity Foundation—a controversial Hare Krishna splinter sect, in which Tulsi grew up.

“Tulsi was very quiet and sort of shy,” Sina recalled. “Reticent. Lovely.” She liked gardening and reading. However, Sina said, “The only books that I remember seeing in the house were Hare Krishna books. It was kind of a tight ship in terms of the children’s exposure to information and knowledge.” When she was four or five years old, Tulsi’s parents gave her a copy of the Bhagavad Gita. Along with her siblings, she was mostly homeschooled. Later, possibly in her early teens, she spent two years at an SIF-run all-girls’ boarding school in the Philippines.

🔗 (<https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/american-sangh-affair-tulsi-gabbard/attachment-13559>)



On 2 February 2019 Tulsi Gabbard announced her candidacy for president. Her parents, Carol and Mike (right), were present by her side. MARCO GARCIA / AP

Her parents soon entered political life. In 1986, Rick Reed, the former publisher of an SIF-affiliated newspaper, won a seat in the Hawaii state senate. Carol and Mike joined Reed’s staff. In 1988, Mike opened a deli inside the Honolulu outlet of Down to Earth, an SIF-affiliated health-food store. In 1991, he began lobbying

on his first public-policy issue when he co-founded a group called “Stop Promoting Homosexuality.”

The group’s initial action was a June 1991 press conference at the state capitol. Although Mike is now most closely identified with the group, Carol was its first spokesperson. “It’s nothing to be proud of,” she said about homosexuality. She later told the media that the SIF was one of the group’s founders. Meanwhile, Mike launched a radio show called *Let’s Talk Straight, Hawaii*.

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Chris Butler set up Science of Identity Foundation, a splinter group of the Hare Krishna sect. SIF had vast influence over Gabbard's life, including over her education.

Soon, his straight talk cost him his business. When a caller to his show asked whom he would hire between a heterosexual and homosexual candidate who were equally qualified, he responded, “I would take the one that is not homosexual.” LGBTQ-rights activists began picketing the Down to Earth store. Within two weeks, Mike shuttered his deli. He used the opportunity to expand his political activity.

Mike founded the Alliance for Traditional Marriage, in 1995, and began campaigning for an amendment to the state constitution to allow the legislature to prevent same-sex marriage. He appeared in television ads promoting the

campaign. A 17-year-old Tulsi joined him for one, in which he says, “We don’t have the absolute right to marry anyone.” Gesturing to Tulsi, he says, “For example, I’m not allowed to marry my daughter.” Then a surfer jogs by, and adds, “And I can’t marry my dog.” The amendment passed in 1998. In 1999, as Mike began filming a television show called *The Gay Deception*, *Honolulu Weekly* accused him of doing “more to limit gay rights—and impugn homosexuals—than any single Hawai’i citizen.” The newspaper attributed Mike’s position to Butler, whose website then claimed that people are pushed into “active” homosexuality “if the environment and social situation promotes homosexuality.”

In the midst of all this, Tulsi partnered with her father in 1996 to found the Healthy Hawai’i Coalition, a non-profit dedicated to protecting the environment and promoting healthy living. In 1998, her parents started a candy company called Hawaiian Toffee Treasures—a family business that Tulsi said she worked in “when I was young.” Sometime in her teens, she said, she also began identifying as a Hindu.

Her aunt remembers it differently. Sina told me that when she asked Mike during the 1990s if his family was Hindu, he “vigorously denied” it and “emphatically and categorically stated, ‘No, that’s different.’” The first time she heard of Tulsi being a Hindu, Sina said, was after she had won the state primary in the 2012 congressional election. “There was this whole campaign to suddenly publicise herself as the first Hindu candidate for national office.”

Tulsi got her first taste of electoral politics in 2000. “I was the first of the Gabbard family to run a race,” Carol told the media about her campaign that year for a seat on the state board of education. Tulsi assisted the campaign. Her older brother, Aryan, also ran. He lost, but Carol won.

In 2002, a 21-year-old Tulsi married Eduardo Tamayo. Described by Tulsi as her “best friend,” Tamayo had also grown up in the SIF. They divorced four years later. Perhaps Tulsi’s personal life was eclipsed by her political ambitions. After years of joint activism with her parents, she launched her own political campaign. So, simultaneously, did her father. Mike ran for a nonpartisan seat on the Honolulu city council, while Tulsi ran for Hawaii’s state house of representatives as a Democrat. When both won, in November 2002, Tulsi became the youngest woman ever elected to any US state legislature.

She soon made headlines for two reasons—her anti-LGBTQ policies and her enlistment in the Army National Guard. In March 2003, the United States invaded Iraq on the pretext of seizing weapons of mass destruction. In April, a week after her birthday, Tulsi took the oath of enlistment on the floor of the state house. “In this generation, where there’s a war on terrorism, I’m honoured to have the opportunity to give something,” she said. After returning from basic training in Texas, she plunged back into politics. In February 2004, as a committee considered a bill to legalise civil unions between same-sex couples, she led a group of picketers outside the room. “As Democrats, we should be representing the views of the people, not a small number of homosexual extremists,” she later said in committee.

Meanwhile, Mike was angling for federal office. In March 2004, the first-term city councillor launched a congressional campaign, running as a Republican against Ed Case, the Democratic incumbent in Hawaii’s second district. Disregarding her own party affiliation, Tulsi made a \$2,000 donation to her father.

Mike’s involvement in the SIF quickly became an issue. In July that year, Case issued an open letter accusing Mike of concealing his background. Among dozens of questions, he asked, “Are you or have you been a follower of Chris Butler?” A profile by *Honolulu* magazine said Mike was dodging interviews, suggesting, “He doesn’t want to answer questions he doesn’t like, especially those concerning his ties to a Hare Krishna splinter group that gave rise to a number of political candidates over the past 30 years.” The magazine reported that when it emailed Mike asking about his connections to the SIF, Tulsi emailed back, “You’re acting as a conduit for ... homosexual extremist supporters of Ed Case.”

Although Tulsi faced re-election to the state house that year, she volunteered to deploy to Iraq. She planned to stay in the legislature, but was shocked to learn that only involuntarily activated legislators were eligible to keep their seats. She deployed at the end of the year. In November, Mike lost his battle for Congress, as well as his seat on the city council. Carol had not sought re-election. All three Gabbards were out of office.

For the next 12 months, Tulsi was in Iraq as a medical administrator. When she returned, in 2005, she got a job working in Washington DC as a legislative aide to

the senator Daniel Akaka. Mike once again ran for office in Hawaii, winning a seat in the state senate. In 2007, he switched parties—“Tulsi has been twisting my arm,” he said—and joined the Democrats.

In 2008, Tulsi deployed to Kuwait for 12 months as a military-police officer. When she returned, she applied for a White House Fellowship. Shortlisted but then denied, she set her sights lower and ran for the Honolulu city council. She won easily. In May 2011, less than six months into her first term, she announced her candidacy for Hawaii’s second congressional district.

It was an open seat—since the incumbent, Mazie Hirono, had retired to run for the US Senate—but Tulsi faced an uphill battle as one of six candidates in the primary election. The clear frontrunner was the former Honolulu mayor Mufi Hannemann, but Tulsi was a young veteran with two overseas tours of duty—an attractive record in a state where military spending reaches nearly fifteen billion dollars per year. Local Democratic activists told me that Hannemann was widely perceived as corrupt. Moreover, he was firmly against gay marriage. Positioning herself as a progressive, Tulsi invoked her experience in the military service to declare her newfound support for gay marriage. In January 2012, she said her “metamorphosis” was prompted by “experiences living and working in oppressive countries, not only witnessing first-hand but actually experiencing myself what happens when a government basically attempts to act as a moral arbiter.”

In August, Tulsi won the primary. It was, the Honolulu Star-Advertiser explained, “an improbable rise from a distant underdog to victory.” Her rise coincided with a surge in donations from the American Sangh.

In August, Tulsi won the primary. It was, the *Honolulu Star-Advertiser* explained, “an improbable rise from a distant underdog to victory.” Her rise coincided with a surge in donations from the American Sangh. Reporting that she could be the first Hindu elected to Congress, the newspaper *India-West* noted that Gabbard was a “disciple of Jagad Guru Siddhaswarupananda Paramahansa”—Chris Butler

—but her connection to the SIF never came up in the race. Instead, she swiftly secured a spot in the national spotlight when she was invited to speak at the Democratic national convention in North Carolina that September.

On 6 November, Tulsi Gabbard won the general election. The Hindu American Foundation immediately trumpeted her victory. “Gabbard is an incredibly inspiring leader whose political rise is a testament to the greatest ideals of American pluralism,” Aseem Shukla, a co-founder of the HAF, said. When she took the oath of office, on 3 January 2013, she used the same copy of the Gita that her parents gave her as a child. She was just 31 years old.

She was assigned to the house committees on armed services and foreign affairs. Her party awarded her a powerful vice-chair position at the Democratic National Committee. For the next few years, her political career skyrocketed. Senior Democratic leaders, such as Nancy Pelosi and Steny Hoyer, praised her as an “emerging star” with “extraordinary political talent.”

Her star appeared to dim when she defied the party leadership at the height of the 2016 presidential election. The establishment candidate, Hillary Clinton, was competing against the progressive senator Bernie Sanders. Members of the DNC were prohibited from endorsing candidates, so Tulsi resigned to back Sanders. In Hawaii, some saw it as a calculated move. “Tulsi made a name for herself as progressive but could continue to vote against refugees, to support Modi, and to go on Fox News parroting Trump talking points,” Shay Chan Hodges, a writer who was her opponent in that year’s Democratic primary for her congressional seat, told me. Hodges argued that “going after the DNC” was Tulsi’s “first move” in preparation for running for president.

As a legislator, Tulsi has had little success. The first bill she introduced, to ease air-travel screening for “severely injured or disabled Armed Forces members and veterans,” was one of her two legislative initiatives that passed. She has sponsored a range of pro-veteran bills, a “Stop Arming Terrorists Act” to deny federal funding to groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, a bill to recognise the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Pearl Harbour bombing, and a bill to recognise the persecution of Yazidis and Christians by the Islamic State.

Outside of Washington DC, her actions have increasingly positioned her as a maverick within her own party. Most recently, she has defended Julian Assange

of WikiLeaks and the whistle-blower Edward Snowden. She has also repeatedly undertaken trips to meet controversial heads of state—Modi in December 2014, Egypt’s Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in November 2015 and Syria’s Bashar al-Assad in January 2017. After the Syria trip, she began denouncing “regime-change” wars.


The extent of her engagement with Modi has raised many eyebrows, even prompting her to write about how her meetings with him are “portrayed as somehow being out of the ordinary or somehow suspect, even though President Obama, Secretary Clinton, President Trump and many of my colleagues in Congress have met with and worked with him.” Yet she did meet him four times between 2014 and 2016. In the first meeting, in New York in September 2014, she seemed to demonstrate a degree of fondness exceeding typical diplomatic courtesy.

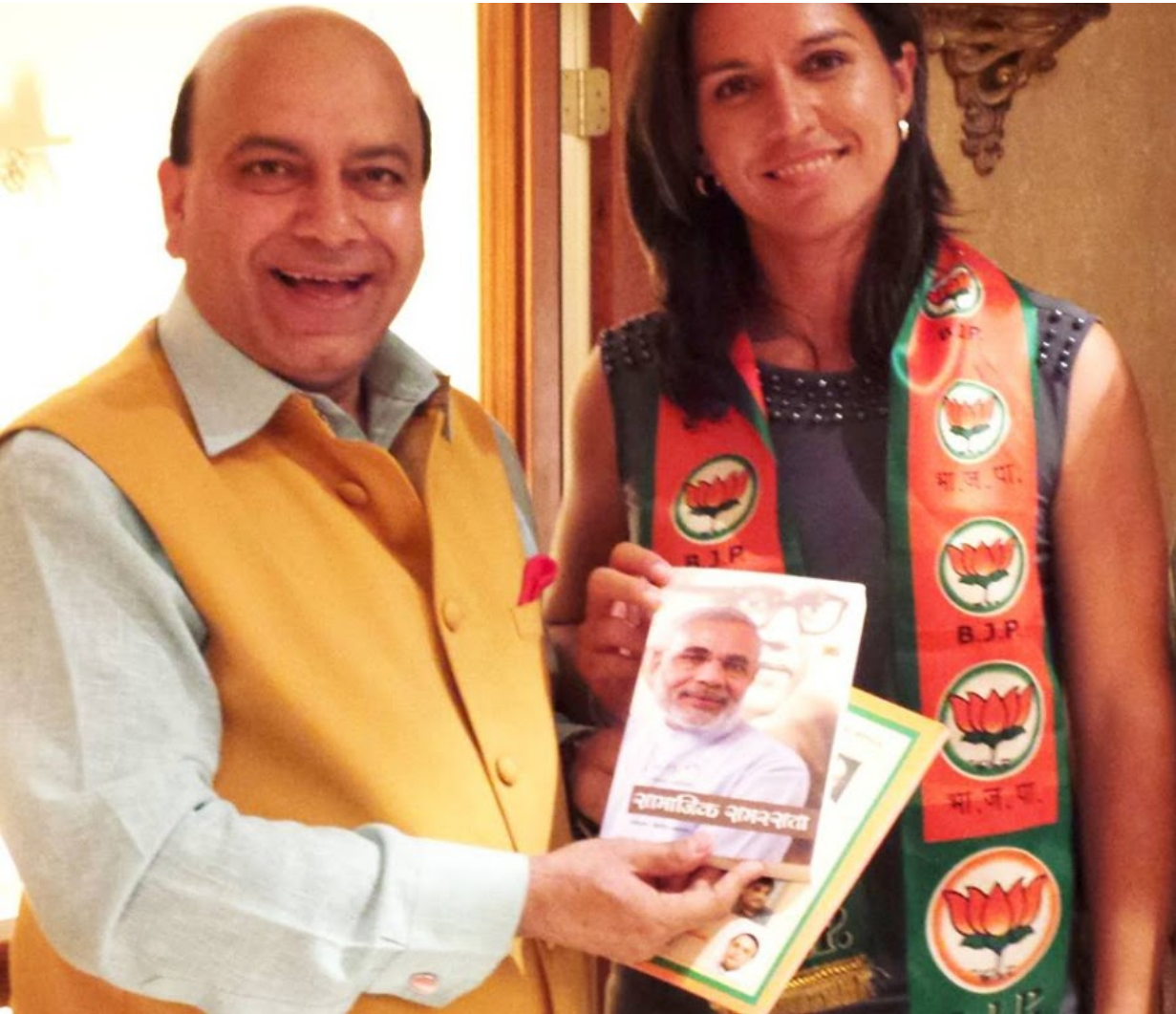
In a media statement Gabbard said that she and Modi discussed “several issues our countries have in common, including how America and India can work together to help combat the global threat posed by Islamic extremism.” Then, the first-term congresswoman gave the newly elected prime minister a gift. “I wanted to give him something that was meaningful to me,” she later said at an HAF event. “I gave him my personal copy of the Gita that my parents gave me. ... The copy of the Gita that I kept with me through both of my deployments to the Middle East, that I would crawl under my sleeping bag in my cot in my tent in Iraq and shine my flashlight and read it late at night when I was done with my day, and the copy of the Gita that I took the oath of office on.”

Tulsi’s deep identification with the Gita, and the act of presenting such a sentimental item to Modi, entrenched her as a distinctly Hindu politician. Yet, while she has always embraced this label, she has shied away from declaring her association with the Sangh. She is also inconsistent in acknowledging her childhood influences.

“MY ATTEMPTS TO OFFER PRAISE to my beloved grandfather, spiritual master, his divine grace AC Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, can be likened to a child offering a small torchlight to the sun,” Gabbard declared in a 2015 video message to ISKCON’s fiftieth-anniversary festival in Kolkata. “My Guru Dev, Siddhaswarupananda Paramahansa, has said that while we will never be able to

repay the debt of gratitude that we all owe Shri Prabhupada, what we can do is be pleasing to him by always taking shelter in the holy names of Krishna.”

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At an OFBJP banquet celebrating Modi's victory in 2014, Tulsi Gabbard, wearing a BJP scarf and holding up a biography on Modi, posed with Vijay Jolly, a top BJP executive.

After Swami Vivekananda introduced Hinduism to the United States at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, Paramahansa Yogananda settled in southern California in the 1920s. His ashrams were mostly founded in wealthy cities such as Los Angeles or Hollywood, and his lectures were popular with celebrities. In 1965, Swami Prabhupada arrived in New York and founded ISKCON the following year. For the first time in history, the Hindu religion found mass appeal among native-born Americans.

It was the height of the Vietnam war. The baby-boomer generation, born after the Second World War was struggling with the assassination of President John F Kennedy, a military draft, anti-war protests, the civil-rights movement, the

sexual revolution and a host of other issues. Across the country, thousands of young people were joining countercultural movements and embracing an anti-establishment spirit. The beat poet Allen Ginsberg wrote that the gurus that proliferated around this time lived in the rich part of New York “and were sponsored by the rich.” Prabhupada did something different. He moved to the working-class Lower East Side, where, Ginsberg said, “the hippies, acid heads, freaks, amphetamine-heads and the meth monsters were.” As the swami reached out to disillusioned youth, the Hare Krishna movement exploded. Today, it counts millions of followers, with hundreds of temples worldwide.

In the early 1970s, Tulsi’s *gurudev*—divine teacher—became one of Prabhupada’s closest disciples. Born Kris Butler, he has held many identities: Chris, Sai, Siddhaswarupananda Paramahansa and Jagad Guru. His years in ISKCON were marred by frequent conflict. He faced near disavowal, rebuke for prioritising his own teachings and denunciation by fellow disciples for encouraging more allegiance to himself than to Prabhupada. In 1977, after Prabhupada’s death, Butler established the SIF, and began initiating his own disciples in the splinter sect.

**“Science of Identity uses tactics nearly identical to Scientology to attack and silence critics, journalists and former members” Christine Gralow told me.
“It’s no wonder so many former Butler devotees do not want to be publicly named in the media.”**

“Science of Identity has always been a highly politically involved organisation in Hawaii,” the journalist Christine Gralow told me. Her investigations have traced the connections between Butler, his foundation and political candidates.

“Science of Identity uses tactics nearly identical to Scientology to attack and silence critics, journalists and former members through attempted character assassination, restraining orders, psychological warfare, and even false police reports,” she said. “It’s no wonder so many former Butler devotees do not want to be publicly named in the media.”

The SIF has had an extensive influence on Gabbard. Her association with the organisation began with her parents, and extended into her education and her entry into politics. Through it, she met both her first and second husbands, and several members of her present congressional office staff.

Butler's group was not part of ISKCON, however. While Prabhupada required his disciples to sell books, flowers and incense on the streets, Butler opposed those practices because they "turn people off." His initiates did not shave their heads or wear robes, and he encouraged them to pursue professions in fields such as law and engineering. That changed when ISKCON's swami visited Hawaii. Whether as a result of sincere conviction or pressure from the larger group, Butler "surrendered" himself—along with his disciples, properties, and money—to Prabhupada in 1971.

His surrender was accompanied by confusion that prefaced years of strife. "For so long, you know, we've been worshiping Sai as God," one of Butler's former disciples told Prabhupada in March 1970. "So what is our position towards Sai?"

Attempting to resolve the conflict, Prabhupada spent several weeks with Butler in Hawaii in June 1975. In a series of wide-ranging conversations preserved in audio recordings, the two discussed levitation, nuclear war, cryonics, the supposed faking of the moon landing, the war in Vietnam—it was "primarily desired by the big corporations," Butler said—and an idea to turn the Bhagavad Gita into a movie. Butler expressed his disdain for people with "big titles," such as "psychologist" or "professor," who deceive people into thinking they are "authorities of some sort."

They also discussed an issue that soon impacted Tulsi's life: education. "I was writing an article on the educational system and how it should be changed," Butler said. He wanted to "put the Bhagavad Gita into this present school system," or alternatively create a "school system apart from it."

Butler ventured into politics that year. In a tract titled, "Why Politicians Are Stupid," he wrote that people were "suffering from the heavy burden of crooked, inhuman, unrighteous political leaders." So he developed a plan. In 1976, his disciples launched a political party, the Independents for Godly Government, and fielded 14 candidates for office. Bill Penaroza, the party's chairman—whose

son, Kainoa, is now Tulsi's chief of staff—unsuccessfully ran for Hawaii's second congressional district.

Meanwhile, Prabhupada's health was failing. His disciples grew increasingly concerned about Butler. "They distribute his books instead of your books on the street," one of them told Prabhupada. Another spoke of the "disease" within Butler's group. Yet another claimed Butler had "deviated" and "created a faction." Another asserted that one of Butler's papers had published an article "against the devotees."

By 1977, when Butler formally founded the SIF upon Prabhupada's death, the group had developed what the *Honolulu Advertiser* called a "loose community of businesses." These included two newspapers—one run by Penaroza, the other by Rick Reed—and the chain of health-food stores called Down to Earth. This prospering network soon proved instrumental to financing the SIF's dreams of developing a political machine—and the Gabbards' campaign.

"As I recall, they became involved in SIF in the early to mid 1970s," Sina told me. In the Gabbard home in American Samoa, she remembered, "a centerpiece of the house would be an altar to Chris Butler," adorned with flowers and incense. She even recalled some reference to their prostrating at his feet. "Mike made the connection and was the vehicle into Butler's SIF." When they moved to Hawaii to join their charismatic young guru, Tulsi's parents were immediately immersed in SIF enterprises. They founded the Ponomauloa school—with Mike as headmaster—to educate the group's children.

In a 1984 lecture, Butler described his views on schooling. "Screw the history book," he said. The only purpose of such books was to please the "school board thing," so that children could "pass the stupid tests that you have to pass in order to make it so that the people are saying you're educated." Instead, children should learn about "very real-life things" such as politics. "What you've got to do is get one of these kids to run for office," he insisted. "Then you learn what politics is. Make real-life stuff. Find out why you have to be a certain age to run for office."

In a rare media interview in 2017, Butler told the *New Yorker* that Tulsi—"whom he's known virtually all her life"—was a young girl who showed "a real gravity and seriousness that was way beyond her years." She, however, has never been

pictured with Butler, and rarely speaks about him. Although she told the *New Yorker* about her “gratitude to him” for “this wonderful spiritual practice that he has given to me,” she cancelled a face-to-face interview with *New York* magazine this year when the journalist said he wanted to talk about Butler and the SIF, and did not answer direct questions about them sent over email.

I reached out to Gabbard's office for an interview request multiple times, but received no answer.

{FOUR}

MUCH OF GABBARD’S EARLY FUNDING, especially before she won the 2012 primary, came from people with traceable connections to the SIF—her family, Rick Reed, the Penaroza family, her future in-laws, and employees of Down to Earth and other SIF-linked businesses, who collectively gave over a hundred thousand dollars. Yet it was the introductions made by leading figures of the American Sangh, such as Vijay Pallod and Mihir Meghani, which opened up a new and untapped nationwide network. They invested time and energy in organising and hosting her at their various events. For a young politician who was still struggling with name recognition in her home state, it was an expedient—and soon to be lucrative—partnership.

Donations poured in from around the country, including from at least three fundraisers held by Sangh groups in two different states. The individual contributions by members of these organisations were often small sums, but they added up to a sizable chunk. Between the start of her campaign, in May 2011, and her election at the end of 2012, Gabbard received nearly ninety-four thousand dollars—almost a tenth of her total itemised individual donations—from clearly identifiable Sangh and pro-Modi sources. That share more than doubled during her first year in office.

Her donors included 22 current and former Sangh executives: five members of the VHPA governing council, four members of the national council of the OFBJP (USA), two national executives and two chapter presidents of the HSS-USA, seven executives from the Ekal Vidyalaya Foundation of USA, a Sewa USA executive and an IDRF executive. Several of them held positions in more than one of these organisations. As her campaign coffers swelled with their donations, Gabbard announced her India policy and, immediately after winning the

primary, took the stage at a VHPA event alongside Ashok Singhal. Meanwhile, many of her new donors organised multi-state tours by BJP and RSS executives to engage the diaspora in anticipation of India's 2014 general election.

The first Indian American who donated to her campaign was Vijay Pallod. "In October 2011, an American friend of mine told me that a young and dynamic woman was running for Congress," he wrote, soon after Gabbard took office in January 2013. "Her chances of winning were considered remote at that time." He was referring to Michael Brannon Parker, who, Pallod told me, convinced him to support Gabbard, even though he was "not too keen on politicians." Pallod eventually donated, winning, as he said, "the title of first donor of Indian origin" to Gabbard's campaign. He arranged a conference call to introduce her to his network in the mainland. The long-time Sangh leader's total contribution to Gabbard's campaign was \$1,851 by the end of 2012. "I am not a big donor by the way," Pallod told me. "Lots of other people gave more than me." Even then, he said, Gabbard "chose to stay at my home" instead of the houses of the larger donors when she visited Houston. "So somewhere I had a connection with her I think."

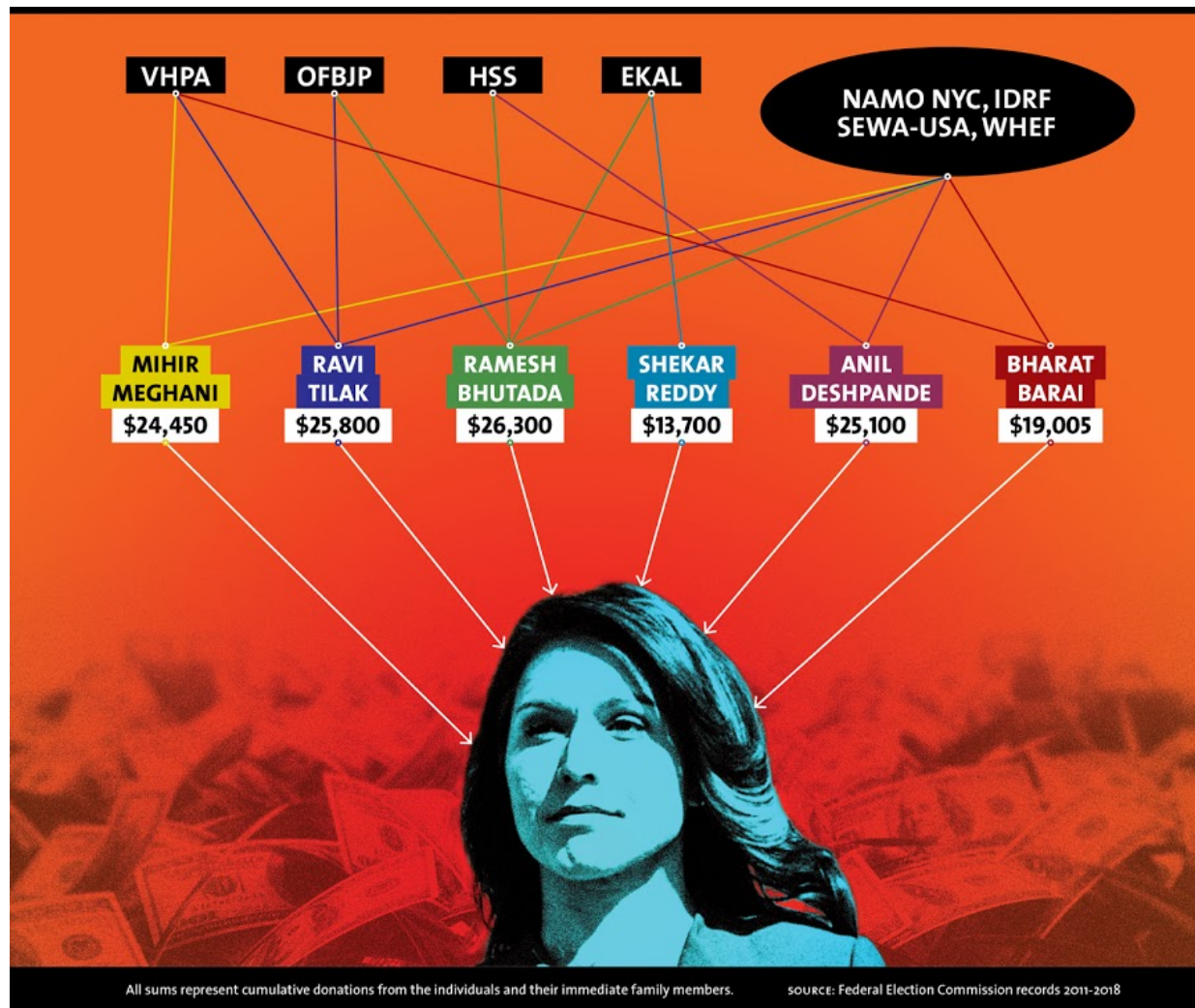
Days before Pallod made a second contribution, Mihir Meghani gave \$1,001. Meghani became one of Gabbard's biggest Indian-American backers, with a cumulative sum of \$18,550 till date. His contributions, however, were not limited to funnelling money to her campaign.

"I want to recognise Mihir," Gabbard said at a 2013 HAF banquet in California. "When I was just at five percent in my campaign—for those of you who don't live in this world of politics, I just want to make sure you're not mistaking: I wasn't five percent behind the other guy, I was five percent to his 95—these were the odds that we were looking at when Mihir gave me time. We spoke. He then gathered leaders from the HAF community from all across the country. I sat behind my computer at home, in the middle of the afternoon in Hawaii, and met via Google Hangout, gathered in living rooms and office spaces all across the country, leaders within HAF, and we had a very constructive and great conversation that is really what started such a beautiful partnership."

Indeed, it was an uphill battle for Gabbard. Despite the initial donations, Gabbard's prospects still looked grim in early 2012. But the cash kept coming. In

March, Meghani gave another \$1,001, while Ramesh Bhutada gave \$501. From California, Babulal Bera and his wife Kanta—the parents of Ami Bera, who went on to win election from California’s seventh congressional district that year—gave a combined total of \$10,000. Babulal’s simultaneous support for his son later landed him in prison for election fraud, after he illegally funnelled \$260,000 to Ami’s campaign through a ring of straw donors. The Beras’ support for Gabbard was followed by a contribution from HAF co-founder Suhag Shukla.

In May that year, the US–India Political Action Committee, a platform created to “enable the entry of Indian-Americans in the political process,” contributed \$5,000. It was an unusual donation for a candidate in her first primary. Aside from a donation to the VHPA, most of the USINPAC’s other contributions that election cycle went to seasoned congressional representatives who had been in office for decades. The only other exception was Ami Bera, who received a donation after winning the California Democratic primary. Perhaps the group perceived a future ally in Gabbard. Its founder, Sanjay Puri, was later praised for “championing the cause and work” of Modi in Washington while he was still only the chief minister of Gujarat.



A few weeks later, Gabbard got donations from Sant Das Gupta, a member of the VHPA’s governing council and an activist for the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti, an RSS offshoot. Shekar Reddy, an advisor to Ekal-Florida, gave \$2,500. Ramesh Bhutada and his son, Rishi, contributed a combined \$2,999 that same month. Meghani began mobilising his network in earnest, after making another contribution.

“Join me in helping elect to the US Congress an exceptional woman who is a decorated war veteran, a bright light in the world of politics, and who happens to be a born Hindu and practicing Hindu,” Meghani wrote in a July email to his network. He emphasised that it was an easy election to win. Urging people to give, he noted, “The earlier she gets the money, the better her chance of winning.” He added that Gabbard’s candidacy was backed by the USINPAC as well as the “community organiser Vijay Pallod.” Donations from Indian Americans, many with key positions in the HSS, VHPA and Ekal, started coming in from Virginia, New Jersey, Florida, Texas, Maryland and California.

From May 2011 to August 2012, the surge of funds from Sangh sources, combined with previous donations from SIF sources, totalled over twenty percent of donations to Gabbard's campaign—about \$190,000 out of \$923,000. The Sangh had successfully positioned itself as a significant constituency for the aspiring congresswoman. When an Indian paper reported on her primary victory, the only person quoted besides Gabbard was Pallod.

Meanwhile, Pallod's mentor, Ramesh Bhutada, was busy helping to host the RSS *sarkaryavah*—general secretary—Suresh “Bhayyaji” Joshi, as he made a two-week tour of the United States. Beginning on 6 August, Joshi, visited HSS chapters in six major cities. He was escorted by Saumitra Gokhale, the global coordinator of the HSS and a former RSS pracharak.

Joshi's tour was still underway when Gabbard travelled to California to speak at her first Sangh event: a VHPA conference in San Jose, on 17 and 18 August. It was less than a week since she had won her primary election. Several of her donors were present, including Rishi Bhutada and Meghani. With over three hundred and fifty attendees hailing from across the United States, as well as India, New Zealand, Trinidad and Canada, it was a golden opportunity to reach an international audience. Although the video footage of her speech is unavailable, the California-based newspaper *India Post* reported that Gabbard received a standing ovation after sharing “her inspirational life story.” The event's concluding remarks came from Ashok Singhal. Considered one of the architects of the Babri Masjid demolition, he is also known for calling it a “welcome sign” that Muslims were “turned into refugees” after the 2002 Gujarat violence.

A few weeks later, Gabbard travelled to Florida for her first Sangh fundraiser. She was hosted by the Indian-American Forum for Political Education, whose then vice-president was Satya Shaw, a member of the national council of the OFBJP (USA). Soon after, beginning on 9 September, campaign-finance records show another surge of donations from Indian Americans. Nainan Desai, the president of the Tampa Bay chapter of the HSS, donated \$1,000. Vishal Gupta, a VHPA coordinator, gave \$3,000. Anil Deshpande, the vice-president of Sewa USA, gave \$4,000.

Pallod donated again, just before the OFBJP held its national convention in New Jersey in September. Days after the convention ended, more Sangh donors

contributed to Gabbard's campaign en masse. Chandrakant Patel, the president-elect of the OFBJP; Vijay Patel, the vice-president of Ekal-Florida; and Satya Shaw gave \$1,000 each. Other new donors included Chandresh Saraiya, the president of Ekal-Florida, and members of the VHPA, including its media director, Vijay Narang. Meanwhile, the OFBJP hosted Ram Lal, a BJP general secretary, and the OFBJP chief Vijay Jolly at a 19 September banquet in Tampa, where Kiran Patel, a Gabbard donor, introduced them as "the highest people from the BJP."

Gabbard went to Texas for her second Sangh fundraiser, on 28 October. At Pallod's house in Houston, around fifty people gathered in the living room. "I have never before hosted a fundraiser for a politician," he later wrote in the *Houston Chronicle*. "I made an exception and invited Tulsi to my Sugar Land home."

Recurring donations came from Ramesh, Rishi and Malani. New donors included Amit Misra, the public-relations chief of the HSS, and Gopal Ponangi, a member of the executive board of Ekal-Dallas. From Houston, Gabbard went to Dallas for a "grand reception" hosted by the Indian American Friendship Council. "She is assured a victory to the US Congress in next week's elections," Prasad Thotakura, the national president of the IAFC, declared. According to *India Post*, he described Gabbard not as a future representative from Hawaii, but as someone "who will provide a voice for all Indians in Congress." By the end of October, Indian Americans from Texas had donated over twenty thousand dollars to her campaign.

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(LEFT) Bharat Barai was one of the primary organisers of Modi's reception at the Madison Square garden in 2016. Before that, he organised videoconferences from 2007 to 2012 to connect Modi to the diaspora.

(RIGHT) On 28 October 2012, Vijay Pallod, a prominent community organiser and leader of the American Sangh, organised a fundraiser for Tulsi Gabbard in his home.

Although she had not yet issued any other formal foreign-policy position, Gabbard announced her India policy during an October 2012 interview with the editor of *India Abroad*. She promised to join the US Congress's influential India Caucus, increase "strategic" ties, advocate "working together as partners in the fight against terrorism" and "unequivocally support" India for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. It was crucial, she insisted in an interview the following month with *Religion News Service*, for the United States and India to have a "closer working relationship." Yet, she argued, "How can we have a close relationship if decision-makers in Washington know very little, if anything, about the religious beliefs, values, and practices of India's 800 million Hindus?"

On 6 November, the day Gabbard was elected, Pallod made his last and largest donation of the year: \$1,000. Less than two weeks later, she began travelling to visit her supporters—not in Hawaii, but in Florida. On 17 November, she gave a keynote address to the convention of the Asian American Convenience Store Association, speaking alongside the AACSA's founding president, Satya Shaw, and chairman, Chandrakant Patel—both also OFBJP executives and recurring Gabbard donors. I sent a detailed list of questions to Shaw and Patel asking about their contributions to Gabbard's campaign, but did not receive an answer.

The next day, she attended her third Sangh fundraiser. "More than 100 Indian-Americans from Central Florida gathered at Park Square Homes conference room on Nov. 18 to meet Rep. Tulsi Gabbard," the website *Khaas Baat* reported. Not all those gathered came just to meet her, however. Recurring donors included Braham Aggarwal, a former executive of VHPA-Florida and multiple OFBJP councillors. A generous \$2,500 came from Akshay Desai—best remembered as the Republican activist who wrote to the Bush administration protesting Modi's visa denial. In total, she received nearly fourteen thousand dollars from Florida-based Indian Americans by the end of the month.

The following month, Pallod, Ramesh Shah and others hosted an OFBJP victory party in Houston to celebrate Modi's third election as chief minister. The

OFBJP's task, *India Herald* reported, was to "fight the negative impressions about Modi that will be created by his opponents who will lobby US lawmakers."

IN AUGUST 2013, Gabbard was just seven months into her first term and not yet running for re-election. The *Honolulu Civil Beat* reported that she had been "criss-crossing the nation" to meet "enthusiastic crowds of Indian-Americans," who "have become a significant part of her fundraising." Donations were still pouring in. That year, about \$112,600 of Gabbard's itemised individual donations—20.7 percent—came from Sangh and pro-Modi sources. Over ninety thousand dollars of that was given in June and July alone. She attended five Sangh fundraisers in four states. Her donors included 28 Sangh executives—16 new, 12 recurring. Dozens of active members of the HSS, VHPA and OFBJP also chipped in, usually donating at the same time as the executives. That year, Gabbard spoke at three HSS and two VHPA events.

When asked about this sudden display of support, the USINPAC's Sanjay Puri said, "The Indian-American community has a love affair with Tulsi." However, the timing of his comments—made days after he partnered with Rajnath Singh, then the BJP president, to lobby Gabbard for a reversal of Modi's visa ban—suggested something more complex.

On 17 July 2013, the BJP announced that Singh would visit the United States along with a delegation of top party executives, including Ananth Kumar, Sudhanshu Trivedi and Vijay Jolly. Hundreds of people packed a New Jersey auditorium to hear Singh speak on 21 July. Chandrakant Patel sat at his right hand. Singh called on the diaspora to support the BJP's bid for election and described Hindutva as an ideal political strategy. The same day, he announced, "I will appeal to the US government to clear the US visa to the Gujarat chief minister." On 23 July, Gabbard met with Singh in Washington. A photo of the meeting shows Gabbard, tucked in a corner of the room, surrounded by nine people. Joining Singh and his delegation were Sanjay Puri and Ram Madhav. Her campaign-finance records, meanwhile, showed an uptick in the size and number of contributions from Indian Americans.

This was the same period in which Bharat Barai—the long-time VHPA activist who had hosted Modi in his home—entered Gabbard's political life. In February, he made his first donation of \$2,600. To date, his total contribution to her

campaign has been \$16,005. In the years before Modi became prime minister, Barai worked extensively to rehabilitate his image in the United States. “I think the US did not recognise the importance of Mr Modi until 2014,” he told me. “This was a tactical mistake. ... Somebody in the state department should have realised that he is the rising son.” From 2007 to 2014, Barai was one of the lead organisers of large-scale videoconferences to connect Modi to the diaspora.

That year, in 12 May, over a thousand people attended a videoconference at the Meadows Club, in a Chicago suburb. Another four hundred filled an overflow facility. Modi’s live address was beamed to 20 cities across the United States. Within two weeks, Gabbard flew to Chicago, where Barai introduced her at a convention of the American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin.

The next month, Gabbard was back in Chicago, as the chief guest at an HSS event: a children’s “Dharma Bee,” featuring a play about the life of Vivekananda as well as quizzes about him and Krishna. On stage, she was flanked by Barai and a host of HSS executives, including Saumitra Gokhale and Ved Nanda. Also on stage was Amrit Mittal, an advisor to the VHPA’s Chicago chapter. Mittal, a former RSS worker, had, like Barai, hosted Modi at his home in 1997. Gabbard stayed for a Sangh fundraiser. New donors included Mittal, Shamkant Sheth, the president of the VHPA-Chicago, and both the vice-presidents of the chapter—Vinesh Virani and Harendra Mangrola. Also donating was Chhotalal Patel, a sponsor of Barai’s videoconferences with Modi. That month, Illinois-based Indian Americans gave almost ten thousand dollars.

One of those donors was Mihir Meghani’s brother, Sumir. Days later, on 21 June, Gabbard joined Mihir in California for another Sangh fundraiser. “Please support Congresswomen Tulsi Gabbard in her re-election to the US Congress,” Meghani wrote in an invitation to the event. Support came from several leading Sangh executives. New donors included Khanderao Kand, the public-relations coordinator of the HSS; Chandru Bhambhra, the president of the Bay Area chapter of the HSS and a former OFBJP president; Atri Macherla, a member of the national council of the OFBJP; and Thanigaimani Keeran, a member of the governing council of the VHPA. By the next day, California-based Indian Americans had given over twenty-three thousand dollars. “I don’t remember,” Bhambhra said, when I asked him about his contribution to Gabbard’s campaign. “Maybe very long back. ... Maybe eight, ten years ago. I don’t know.”

Gabbard continued crisscrossing the nation. On 13 July, she was in Houston at Pallod's invitation, to inaugurate a banquet alongside Ramesh Bhutada. Introduced by Pallod's son, Bharat, she spoke, the *India Herald* reported, about "how she won the election as an underdog in the race." Gabbard's presence at these events always corresponded with a surge in donations. New donors included Ekal-Houston's president, Nikhil Mehta. Also donating was Ramesh Shah, the long-time VHPA activist who is also the chairperson of the Ekal Vidyalaya Foundation of USA and a former OFBJP vice-president. That day, Gabbard netted over twenty-one thousand dollars from Texas-based Indian Americans.

Ten days later, on 23 July, Gabbard met the BJP president, who was in the country to lobby for the revocation of Modi's visa ban, in Washington. Two days later, Meghani sent a fundraising letter suggesting that he was selectively backing congressional candidates who supported Modi. He wrote that Mike Honda, then the representative for California's seventeenth congressional district, had refused to remove his signature from a letter "asking the US State Department to continue denying Narendra Modi a visa." So Meghani urged his network to donate to Honda's challenger, Ro Khanna. "I have given the maximum donation of \$5,200 to only two candidates this year—Tulsi Gabbard and Ro Khanna," he wrote, asking others to do the same. A few days later, Gabbard received a massive surge of donations from Florida-based Indian Americans, amounting to over thirty-six thousand dollars.

I briefly spoke with Meghani by phone, but he asked me to email him questions. He did not respond to my detailed list of queries about his contributions to Gabbard's campaign.

Over the next months, Gabbard went on a speaking circuit of Sangh events, particularly in California. A 25 October campaign expenditure for "catering services" at an Indian restaurant in San Jose corresponded with a surge in contributions from donors such as Ajay Shah, a member of the VHPA's governing council, and Navneet Chugh, who was later appointed to head the California chapter of the USINPAC. Gabbard received nearly twelve thousand from California-based Indian Americans.

Donations were still coming in when Tulsi arrived in Atlanta on 27 October, to speak at two VHPA events in one day. Kusum Khurana, the president of the VHPA's Atlanta chapter, introduced her at the first event, a Diwali celebration. The second event—co-sponsored by the United States Hindu Alliance, whose founders include Chandrakant Patel, Ved Nanda and the VHPA's Mahesh Mehta—swiftly took a political turn. Gokul Kunnath, the president of USHA, is a former RSS swayamsevak who met Modi in 1987 and sponsored him to speak at a 1997 event in Atlanta. The website *NRIPulse* reported that after Gabbard spoke, Kunnath took the stage to ask the congresswoman “to initiate efforts to have a bipartisan resolution” inviting Modi to address a joint session of Congress. A warning accompanied his appeal: “As India rises to the position of a superpower, the United States should treat India with respect.”

Early in November, Gabbard flew to Australia. She was there for her brother's wedding, but used the opportunity to also speak at another Sangh event. As reported by *Indian Link*, she spoke “about her plans to travel to India soon” while standing in front of an HSS-Sydney sign. She was, indeed, to visit India soon. Before then, however, the OFBJP mobilised to ensure Modi's election, while Gabbard worked in Congress to help rehabilitate his tarnished reputation and oppose all attempts to discuss him, the RSS, or the violence of Hindu nationalism.

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WHEN THE NEW YORK TIMES reported the violence in Gujarat on 2 March 2002, it cited Hindu, Muslim and Sikh residents of Ahmedabad who had identified the VHP as an instigator. Follow-up reportage called it “India's Latest Nightmare,” while noting that Modi had “blamed Muslims for provoking the mob attacks.” Explaining that Hindu nationalism “has become politically mainstream in this nation and in the West,” the paper named the RSS as the “mothership” of the ideology and the BJP and VHP as the political and religious wings of the RSS. Controversy only deepened when the IDRF scandal—in which the American non-profit was accused of channelling nearly four million dollars to Sangh groups in India—broke in November.

In 2004, Ram Madhav visited two prestigious universities on the US east coast to, in his words, discuss “concerns about Gujarat.” One invitation, issued by

Johns Hopkins University in Maryland, called Madhav a representative of “the pre-eminent nationalist Hindu organisation of India.” His visit, however, only made things worse. A petition signed by over a hundred and fifty academics compared the RSS to the Ku Klux Klan, calling it “an organisation inspired and modelled on the Italian fascists and the Nazis.” The invitation stood, but students picketed Madhav’s event. The following year, Modi was denied a visa.

Over the coming years, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom repeatedly highlighted Hindu nationalism as a leading source of religion-based violence in India. “The increase in violence against religious minorities coincided with the rise in political influence of groups associated with the Sangh Parivar, a collection of organisations that view non-Hindus as foreign to India and aggressively press for governmental policies to promote a Hindu nationalist agenda,” its 2006 annual report said. Subsequent reports included nearly identical language, usually also noting that Modi’s administration in Gujarat was accused of complicity in the 2002 pogrom.

On 18 November, a bipartisan group introduced House Resolution 417. Recognising the violence in Odisha in 2008, in Gujarat in 2002 and throughout the nation following the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, it warned that “strands of the Hindu nationalist movement have advanced a divisive and violent agenda that has harmed the social fabric of India.”

In 2009, in the wake of the anti-Christian violence in Odisha, the USCIRF placed India on its watch list, alongside countries such as Somalia and Egypt. Later that year, Madhav allegedly presented the US State Department with a copy of Michael Brannon Parker’s book explaining the RSS’s version of events. Meanwhile, the American Sangh pursued—and found—representatives willing to champion Modi in the US Congress.

“I was the first member of Congress to advocate for Modi,” Joe Walsh, a former representative from the eighth congressional district in Illinois, wrote in 2014. First elected in 2010, Walsh was a Republican who identified as a member of the conservative-populist Tea Party movement. In 2012, as he campaigned for a second term, supporting Modi became one of his core issues.

Modi “is widely believed to be a serious contender for the 2014 election for Indian Prime Minister,” Walsh wrote in a letter to the then secretary of state, Hillary Clinton. “It is time the State Department reconsiders permitting Mr. Modi into the United States.” The next month, speaking as the chief guest at Barai’s biennial videoconference with Modi, he promised not to smile until Modi was invited to the United States. At a Chicago press conference, he declared, “I am here because Chief Minister Modi has become a hero of mine.” Flanked by Barai on his right and Shrinarayan Chandak, the vice-president of the midwest chapter of the HSS, on his left, Walsh continued, “No music until Modi is here. ... It is an outrage that our government has not issued Mr Modi a visa.”

Walsh’s appearances coincided with advertisements in diaspora newspapers reading, “If you love Modi, send Walsh back to Congress.” The ads were funded by a new political-action committee founded by the industrialist Shalabh Kumar. “Kumar’s PAC put up more than \$500,000 to support Tea Party Republican Joe Walsh,” *India West* later reported. The money was wasted. Walsh was voted out of office on 6 November 2012. Barai, meanwhile, performed damage control, assuring a media outlet that Walsh’s loss had “nothing to do with his stand on Chief Minister Modi’s visa.”

Gabbard entered office as Walsh exited. By February 2013, Barai turned his attention to her. When I asked Barai about his abrupt transition from supporting a Tea Party Republican to a progressive Democrat, he said, “It doesn’t matter to me, whether it is a Republican or Democrat.” According to the sociologist Arvind Rajagopal, this is an example of the Sangh’s opportunism. “Power is its principle,” he told me. “So the Democratic Party values are only relevant when convenient.”

In February 2013, Modi was announced as the keynote speaker at the India Economic Forum at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School the following month. Since he was still banned from entering the United States, he was scheduled to speak via videoconference. When local faculty heard the news,

they began a petition demanding that the invitation be revoked. “Recently there have been efforts to whitewash Modi’s grim record and to grant him international respectability,” the petition, which was signed by hundreds of academics from around the country, warned. Amidst international coverage of the incident, Modi’s speech was cancelled. The Sangh, though, was undeterred. On 23 March, it staged a “funeral of free speech” at Wharton.

Less than a week later, three Republican representatives met Modi in Gujarat. They were the first US officials to engage with him since 2005. While there, they held a press conference with Modi to publicly invite him to the United States. *Reuters* reported that the press conference was seen by the Indian media “as a public relations coup for Modi, who has been trying to cultivate an image of a statesman.” The visit’s legitimacy came under scrutiny when it was alleged that Shalabh Kumar had solicited the three Republicans’ participation. Kumar’s organisation, the National American Indian Public Policy Institute, claimed it had funded the “business delegation.” Kumar accompanied the trio throughout the visit, as did the OFBJP’s Vijay Jolly, who declared, “Modi has won the hearts of the American friends.”

By the end of 2013, however, the situation grew thornier for Modi in the United States.

On 18 November, a bipartisan group of 15 representatives introduced House Resolution 417. Recognising the violence in Odisha in 2008, in Gujarat in 2002 and throughout India following the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, it warned that “strands of the Hindu nationalist movement have advanced a divisive and violent agenda that has harmed the social fabric of India.” It praised the US government for denying Modi a visa. He now risked formal censure in the country.

The Hindu American Foundation denounced the resolution as “grossly inaccurate.” Sheetal Shah, the HAF’s senior director—and daughter of the Modi backer Dhiru Shah—cautioned against blaming “one ideology,” stating, “Resolutions such as this one, devoid of the necessary context when examining religious violence in India, only serve to provoke and inflame.” The USINPAC also spoke out. Pledging to “spare no effort” to stop it, they complained that the resolution “intended to influence India’s upcoming elections by focusing on the

2002 Gujarat riots some 11 years after the fact.” Both groups took to Capitol Hill to pressure lawmakers. “Each office who signed the resolution received a visit from HAF,” a congressional staffer later told the news magazine *Outlook*. “They are definitely trying to undermine anyone in Washington who is critical of Modi.”

Gabbard soon stepped forward to help stifle the attempted criticism. “It is critically important that we focus on strengthening the ties between the two nations, and I do not believe that H. Res. 417 accomplishes this,” she said on 18 December. The next day, the HAF issued a statement: “First Hindu Member of Congress Opposes Anti-India Resolution.” It quoted Rishi Bhutada, who urged other representatives to “join this latest rebuke” by Gabbard. Over the next two weeks, Amrit Mittal and Bharat Barai—both of whom had hosted Modi—as well as Sanjay Puri all donated generously to her campaign.

The battle over the resolution began just as the OFBJP launched its campaign for Modi’s 2014 election. The major players were all Gabbard donors. Bharat Barai, Ramesh Shah, Pallod and the then OFBJP president, Chandrakant Patel, all travelled to India to canvass in person. “Only because of Narendra Modi, I went to campaign in India,” Pallod told me. “Those who did not know him, I shared my personal experience with them and it made a difference.” Ramesh Bhutada remained in Houston to manage the group’s largest phone-banking centre. “Preparations were almost like that for an Indian wedding,” Bhutada reportedly said. Preferring a martial analogy, *India Herald* described the operatives deploying to India as “volunteers turned political warriors.”

Years of national preparation preceded the operation.

IN NOVEMBER 2011, the OFBJP held two high-level training camps, in New Jersey and Houston. Vinay Sahasrabuddhe—a political advisor to Nitin Gadkari, the BJP president at the time—conducted both. Vijay Jolly termed this a “first of its kind” exercise. In Houston, *India Herald* reported, Shah praised the BJP’s initiatives, while Bhutada “reminded of efforts required to build a strong organisation.”

I sent Bhutada a series of questions about his role in the American Sangh, Modi and his contributions to Gabbard’s campaign, but he did not respond.

In October 2012, over eight hundred people gathered in New Jersey at a reception for LK Advani, who praised the RSS and promised that the BJP would provide voting rights to overseas citizens of India. Jayesh Patel, then the president of the OFBJP, urged the community to support the BJP in the 2014 election. Five months later, in March 2013, the OFBJP organised gatherings in both Chicago and New Jersey for a special videoconference with Modi.

“Whatever you do, wherever you work, India should be the top priority for all its citizens,” Modi told the audience. In June, Dhuru Shah hosted the BJP leader Subramanian Swamy to speak about the elections at a conference in Atlanta. “He will be the prime minister,” Swamy said of Modi. He urged the diaspora to get involved in the process. In July, Rajnath Singh visited the United States, meeting Gabbard and speaking in New Jersey.

In September, Smriti Irani, then a BJP vice-president, travelled from India to inaugurate the OFBJP’s convention in Florida, where Modi spoke—for the third time that year—via videoconference. “Only the BJP can save the country from the current crisis,” he told an audience of over a thousand people. He urged them to participate in the election, concluding, “As soon as I finish, they will start.” Six other speakers, including Barai, were all Gabbard donors.

In December 2013, after the BJP won three of the five elections to state legislatures, the OFBJP organised victory parties around the United States. Nearly three hundred people gathered in Houston. “Modi is what India needs,” Ramesh Bhutada declared. *Indo-American News* reported that Ramesh Shah called it “critical to campaign aggressively on the phone from here.” Speaking to the *Times of India*, Pallod said, “Today we pledged to work to bring BJP to power and make Modi the next Prime Minister of India.”

In the first week of January 2014, the OFBJP held a global meet at the party’s headquarters in Delhi. Jolly, Advani, Gadkari, Rajnath Singh and the future vice-president of India, N Venkaiah Naidu, addressed 160 delegates from around the world. “This is the first time that a programme to connect BJP with the global Indian diaspora is being organised on such a scale,” Jolly said. Meanwhile, around seven hundred volunteers began phone-banking in Houston. “We had volunteers calling up their relatives, friends, and friends of friends in India,” Bhutada said. At another call centre in Florida, Chandrakant Patel explained, “Each volunteer is expected to make at least 200 calls.”

In March, many of Gabbard's donors prepared to leave for India. Chandrakant Patel led a team of over a thousand OFBJP volunteers who, one paper reported, "travelled to India at their own expense to campaign for BJP." Barai led a team of over six hundred volunteers. From Houston, Pallod joined a team of thirty. *India Herald* reported that Ramesh Bhutada encouraged the volunteers as they left, saying, "This is the moment to pay our debt to our motherland."

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Leading figures of the American Sangh, including Bharat Barai, put their weight behind organising a grand reception for Modi at the Madison Square Garden, for his first visit to the United States as prime minister, following the revocation of the visa ban.

One last action in Washington DC cast a shadow over Modi's chances for success. On 4 April, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, a bipartisan caucus of the US House of Representatives, held a hearing to discuss the plight of religious minorities in India. "Many religious minority communities fear religious freedom will be jeopardized if the BJP wins and the Gujarat Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, becomes Prime Minister," Katrina Lantos Swett, the vice-chair of the USCIRF, and the opening witness, warned the commission. Witnesses from human-rights outfits spoke about the impunity and governmental complicity in the 2002 violence.

Both the HAF and the USINPAC submitted statements denouncing the hearing as an attempt to "influence" India's elections. The HAF criticised the hearing's "stated scope and purpose," while the USINPAC called it "extremely unjustified

and untimely.” Gabbard echoed their rhetoric. “I have grave concerns about the timing of this hearing,” she said. “The goal of this hearing ultimately is to influence the outcome of this election. ... I am concerned that an outcome or effect of this hearing could begin to foment such fear and loathing used for political purposes that we have seen occur in other places.”

In a later interview with the HAF, Gabbard called herself the “lone dissenting voice,” and said that there were not “a lot of friendly faces in the crowd.” Yet, she suggested, she played a crucial role in correcting “misperceptions that were being furthered about India and about ... Modi.” She added, “My taking five minutes out of my day to go there and speak on this was a very small thing when you look at the impact that it had.”

The following day, Venkat Rao Mulpuri, an OFBJP executive in Washington DC, donated \$1,000 to Gabbard’s campaign.

The results of the general election were announced on 16 May 2014. The BJP won with the first simple majority India had seen in 30 years. On the other side of the world, celebrations erupted in the United States. “I never thought it would happen,” Pallod, who had been so excited that he had not slept that night, declared. “There’s never a majority.” Ramesh Bhutada trumpeted “a second Independence for India.”

Gabbard issued a statement the same day. “I recently spoke with Narendra Modi by phone and congratulated him and the Bharatiya Janata party for winning,” she said. Why a first-term congresswoman had a direct line to Modi before he even assumed office was an unanswered question. “I look forward to working with Mr Modi,” she continued. “A partnership between the world’s two largest and greatest democracies is necessary for us to successfully address the many global challenges we face.”

When Modi was sworn in on 26 May, the OFBJP organised parties around the United States—in California, New York, Texas, Florida and elsewhere. “I have never seen a visionary person like Shri Modi,” Chandru Bhambhra said. Three days later, Gabbard partnered with the three Republican representatives who had visited Modi to co-sponsor a resolution promising to work with him to “advance shared values and interests.”

At a June victory party in Atlanta, speaking to an audience of seven hundred people, Dhiru Shah argued that Modi would “require the support” of the United States in order to “perform.” He said, “That we can achieve only if we NRIs were to influence the foreign policy makers in the United States.” He had one person in mind: Tulsi Gabbard. She had criticised “a resolution against Narendra Modi” and was “a lady who has been doing work for you.” So, he said, “Open up your check books. Write a check for her because she’s fighting election in 2014.” At another party, on 16 May—the day the BJP’s victory was announced—Shah urged a hundred celebrants to support Gabbard in her upcoming re-election in gratitude for her opposition to the resolution.

Indeed, Gabbard’s fortunes rose with Modi’s in 2014. Over the year, \$123,000 of Gabbard’s itemised individual donations—about 24 percent of the total—came from Sangh and pro-Modi sources. She attended five fundraisers in four states. There were calls to finance her campaign at three separate BJP victory parties, all of which cited her opposition to H Res 417 as a pre-election service done for Modi.

In June, after Dhiru Shah urged his Atlanta audience to support Gabbard in order to “influence the government,” Ramesh Bhutada wrote an article for the *Houston Chronicle*. “Indian voters have put forward a leader who recognizes their aspirations for themselves and for India,” he said. “The US government should recognize this and end its current policy of ostracizing Modi,” who had won because of his “RSS training.” Because of Modi’s “upbringing in the culture of RSS,” he concluded, “Critics should revisit the RSS.”

Gabbard, meantime, was felicitated by the OFBJP. On 21 June, she was the keynote speaker at a banquet hosted by the group’s Los Angeles chapter. *India West* reported that she spoke about supporting “India’s war against all forms of terrorism,” and answered questions about how Indian Americans could get more politically involved in the United States. Throughout the event, she wore a saffron scarf emblazoned with the BJP logo. The attendees donated generously. New donors included Vinod Ambastha, the president of the HSS-USA, as well as Ravi Tilak, Paresh Shah and Manohar Shinde, committee members of the OFBJP’s Los Angeles chapter.

Sucheta Kapuria, a trustee of the Dharma Civilization Foundation, also contributed. The DCF's board includes Shinde—one of many senior Sangh pracharaks, according to the HSS founder, Sharda—Ambastha, and Ved Nanda. The DCF made headlines when the University of California, Irvine rejected a \$6-million endowment from the group after the faculty accused it of having RSS ties. By the end of June, Gabbard received \$11,800 from California-based Indian Americans, plus a generous donation from the DCF president, Kalyan Viswanathan.

In August, the American Sangh focussed its attention on organising a grand reception for Modi at Madison Square Garden, a massive arena in New York City. It would be his first trip to the United States following the revocation of his visa ban, which came only in recognition of his position as prime minister. Vijay Jolly had begun a 12-day tour of the country to generate diaspora anticipation. “The Sangh plays a key role in organising this diaspora diplomacy—and, in particular, Ram Madhav,” Ian Hall told me. A five-person committee was entrusted with organising the reception. All of its members were leaders of the US-based Sangh affiliates: the HSS general secretary Yelloji Rao Mirajkar, Mahesh Mehta from the VHPA, Chandrakant Patel, Ramesh Shah and Bharat Barai. Speaking of his role in planning the event, Barai told me he was chosen because it had to be “somebody that [Modi] could trust.”

That month, Gabbard was in Atlanta as a keynote speaker at an OFBJP banquet celebrating Modi's victory. The master of ceremonies was Dhiru Shah. Noting that she was campaigning for a second term, Shah urged, “It's necessary that we support a person like Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard. And whatever the donations you make is not enough, because she needs to win.” Shah asked Gabbard to push Congress to pass a resolution apologising to Modi and “affirming that it was a mistake on the part of the United States to have cancelled his visa.”

Then Gabbard spoke. “I met so many of you almost a year ago,” she said. “Huge congratulations on the elections held in India, to Prime Minister Modi taking his position, and to all of you for your hard work in making that possible.” She called the election result an impressive outcome. “All across the country, I heard different people saying that Narendra Modi would not be prime minister of

India. He is. Why is that possible? Because people like you stood up and said, ‘We’re gonna make this happen.’”

Jolly, who was present at the banquet, spoke next. “I’m a swayamsevak,” he said. “I am a soldier of the Bharatiya Janata Party.” Addressing Gabbard, he said, “The whiff of fresh air which was evident after landing on the soil of Hawaii is the same when I sit over in your company.” Then Jolly, a politician from India, assured Gabbard, a first-term US congresswoman, that she would be re-elected. “We are sure, with the support of the people of Indian origin, the non-resident Indians and, of course, the US citizens, your victory later this year is a foregone conclusion,” he declared. “I’m predicting today for your victory.” He compared her to Modi, explaining that he once told US officials that Modi would one day be “the supremo” not only of the BJP, but of India. “We were proved correct then, and we will be proved correct later this year.”

Gabbard posed for pictures with Jolly while holding up a biography of Modi. She once again wore a saffron BJP scarf. According to her filings with the federal election commission, her campaign also paid at least part of the bill for the banquet—\$1,500 for catering at Ashiana Restaurant. Her campaign coffers reflected the gratitude of the attendees. By September, Gabbard got over seven thousand dollars from Georgia-based Indian Americans.

On 14 September, Gabbard’s campaign received more funds from New Jersey. She does not appear to have been present, but it was a de facto Sangh fundraiser—recurring donors included Rakesh Shreedhar, the president of the New York chapter of the HSS, and Balram Advani, an advisor to Ekal-NY. Other donors included prominent industrialists as well as committee members of a youth camp run by Advani. Gabbard pocketed nearly thirty-five thousand dollars.

Two weeks later, she went to New York to meet Modi at his rock-star reception and gift him her childhood copy of the Gita. The heavily hyped event cost an estimated \$1.5 million—eighteen thousand people attended. Modi’s “entrance after a series of musical and dance warm-up acts sent the audience into a frenzy,” *Time* magazine reported.

Gabbard’s fortunes rose with Modi’s in 2014. Over the year, \$123,000 of Gabbard’s itemised individual

Gabbard's recognised individual donations—24 percent—came from Sangh and pro-Modi sources. She attended five fundraisers in four states. There were calls to finance her campaign at three separate BJP victory parties, all of which cited her opposition to H Res 417 as a pre-election service done for Modi.

“The 2014 election was colossally expensive,” Hall told me. “A conservative estimate put party spending at \$5 billion. Some think it was more. Some of this money did come from sources within India, but it is thought that a considerable amount came from the diaspora, who overwhelmingly backed Modi.” Hall suggested that Modi spoke at diaspora events in New York, London and Sydney to—among other reasons—“thank them for their financial as well as political backing.” His support base in the United States loved it.

“This event is a hallmark to show how emotionally bonded he is with the community here,” Barai said. Pallod, who flew his whole family out from Texas to attend, praised Modi’s training as an organiser with the RSS. Speaking to *Al Jazeera*, he said, “Modi deserves all this fanfare and extravaganza. ... Hindutva is a way of life, and our PM will pave the way.”

Several hundred people protested outside the Madison Square Garden. “Mostly Americans of Indian descent, both Hindu and Muslim, gathered across the street,” *The Telegraph* reported. They chanted, “Modi, Modi, you can’t hide, you committed genocide!”

Gabbard spent the next month collecting donations from across the United States. In early October, she flew to Texas for a fundraiser in the Dallas region, hosted by the local leadership of the HSS, HAF and DCF. She left with nearly fourteen thousand dollars in contributions from Texas-based Indian Americans. Soon after, she was in Chicago for a 26 October fundraiser, co-hosted by Barai and Nirav Patel, the youth coordinator for the OFBJP’s Chicago chapter. “She is a staunch supporter of Narendra Modi even before he assumed PM post,” Barai said, as reported by the *Chicago Tribune*. Gabbard praised Modi’s “dynamic leadership,” explaining that despite having “other engagements, I adjusted to

meet him personally.” She got over twelve thousand dollars from Indian Americans in the Chicago region.

On 4 November, Vijay Jolly’s prediction proved correct: Gabbard was re-elected to a second term. However, she did not rest on her laurels. She kept fundraising throughout that month, garnering \$22,000 from Indian-American donors in Texas and California alone.

She also returned to Houston, to speak at a fundraiser for a textbook-revision campaign, spearheaded by the HAF in California. In an on-stage interview with Jay Kansara, the group’s director of government relations, she spoke about meeting Modi, the Bhagavad Gita, and “human-rights atrocities that are occurring to Hindus.” Kansara praised her as “one of the only members who took a firm stand against legislation and hearings that were attempting to influence India’s elections.” The HAF, he said, had played “a central role in planning the prime minister’s visit.” Revealing that she had booked tickets to visit India, Gabbard said, “The prime minister personally invited me to go and said he would help plan my trip.”

Ramesh Bhutada also spoke, saying, “Hinduism must be projected in the right way in this country.” Joining him was Murali Balaji, the HAF’s director of education and curriculum reform—the position was created with grants from the Uberoi Foundation, a trust chaired by Ved Nanda—and Rishi Bhutada. A few days later, Rishi again donated to Gabbard’s campaign.

In Delhi, from 21 to 23 November, Gabbard—as well as textbook revision—were common themes at the first World Hindu Congress. A project of Swami Vigyananand, a joint general secretary of the VHP, the event was inaugurated by Mohan Bhagwat and Ashok Singhal. While Bhagwat argued that “only Hindu society” could deliver the message that the “world is one family,” Singhal declared, “Proud Hindus have finally come to rule Delhi. ... It’s time to create a Hindu superpower in the world.”

While various speakers insisted that India’s textbooks must focus on the “inculcation of value system,” the activist Arvind Kumar talked about the HAF’s textbook campaign in California. “Communists from Bharat recruited 17 Democratic Party assembly members to fight against HAF,” he alleged. Samir Asthana offered a solution. “We need leaders like Tulsi Gabbard,” he said. Sanjay

Puri echoed him. Speaking at the WHC’s “political conference,” he urged his audience to “take inspiration from Ms Tulsi Gabbard.”

As the year came to a close, the OFBJP hosted its annual convention in California and Gabbard flew to India. “We want to make sure our organisation is strong in the United States,” Chandrakant Patel said at the convention. *India West* reported that Vijay Chauthaiwale, Jolly’s replacement as head of the BJP’s foreign-affairs cell, called the event “vital to the party’s growth and evolution.”

On 16 December, Gabbard arrived in India. Her first meeting was with Modi; her next was with Rajnath Singh, who was now the home minister. Then, she flew to Goa to attend the India Ideas Conclave. While her office called the conclave “India’s most eclectic and thought-provoking platform for global leaders and experts,” the event’s own journal called it “a maiden attempt” by the RSS-affiliated think tank India Foundation—whose driving force is Shaurya Doval, the son of India’s national security advisor, Ajit Doval—to get “nationalist thinkers across the world to spend a few days together.” The India Foundation had just helped organise Modi’s reception at Madison Square Garden. It was their inaugural conclave.

Gabbard spoke at a special plenary to launch the conclave. “The majority of the country’s right-wing intellectual elite was present, besides Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ministers and leaders,” the *Hindustan Times* reported. The other speakers included David Frawley—labelled by the Indian journalist Kaveree Bamzai as the “RSS’s favourite western intellectual”—and the Belgian writer Koenraad Elst. “You should make it uncool to be Muslims,” Elst said. His comments outraged one of the few Muslim delegates, who walked out as he praised the VHP’s “re-conversion” campaign, adding, “We need to liberate Muslims from Islam. Every Muslim is an abductee and must be brought back.”

From Goa, Gabbard went to Bengaluru. There, she gave the keynote address at an event organised by Manthana, which the RSS’s *Samvada* calls “an RSS-inspired intellectual forum.” Calling Modi a “man on a mission,” she assured her audience that “the past is buried.” She concluded, “There was a lot of misinformation that surrounded the event in 2002.”

Hours before leaving India, on 3 January 2015, Gabbard again spoke at an India Foundation event—this time a Delhi forum organised specially for her on “the

future of Indo-US relations.” As she returned to the United States, *The Telegraph* published an article with the headline: “Sangh Finds a Mascot in American Tulsi.” Her reception in India, the paper reported, “went way beyond the ritual courtesies an Indian MP—her counterpart in India—would be extended abroad.” She was becoming “the best advertisement the Sangh can hope to get.”

“**WE ALL KNOW TULSI GABBARD** from Hawaii,” Saumitra Gokhale said in Los Angeles, during a May 2016 lecture on the global growth of the RSS through the work of the HSS. “She attended a few of our events,” he said. “She has been a very close friend of Sangha and always been there for us.”

Gokhale’s comments came just two months after Gabbard, for the first time, discussed her ties to the RSS and the BJP, in an interview with *Quartz India*. “I have no affiliation with the RSS,” she said. Without directly addressing it, she discounted the significance of her wearing a BJP sash at OFBJP banquets in 2014. “Sometimes people on both sides, for their own purposes, try to say I somehow favour, or am part, of the BJP, or take photos of me at Indian events and circulate them for their own promotional reasons,” she said.

A year later, in November 2017, the VHPA’s Abhaya Asthana announced Gabbard as the chairperson of the second World Hindu Congress, to be held in Chicago in September 2018. “I am so honoured to be joining you as the chair,” she said in a video message to the VHPA. A few months later, Mohan Bhagwat, the RSS’s supreme leader, was announced as the keynote speaker. By June, various diaspora groups began protesting Tulsi’s presence at the event. At the same time, the Central Intelligence Agency labelled the VHP a “religious militant organisation.” Finally, four days before the event, Gabbard announced that she had already withdrawn many months before, “due to ethical concerns and problems that surround my participating in any partisan Indian political event in America.”

Politically, it was a safe move. The WHC was beginning to attract negative press. One report noted that a speaker on education had recently called critics of the RSS “cockroaches”—a term infamously used in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. The event also attracted protestors. Over two days, hundreds of South Asians—Dalits, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs and many others—picketed. “Prosecute Mohan Bhagwat for crimes against humanity,” one sign said.

It might have appeared that Gabbard was finally distancing herself from the Sangh. But things were not that simple. Gabbard, ever the deft politician, set about managing her constituencies.

Immediately after she won re-election to a fourth term, in November 2018, the news channel *NDTV* reported that Gabbard was quietly “reaching out to prospective donors, including a large number of Indian-Americans” in anticipation of running for president. An article in *The Intercept* reported that Bharat Barai and the HAF’s Suhag Shukla met Gabbard privately in her Washington office to discuss, among other things, the fallout from the WHC. Barai told the journalist that they had reached a “happy consensus to put that episode behind us.”

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Many in the diaspora, however, do not appear ready to forget the past so quickly. Gabbard, of course, faced protests in Los Angeles in March this year as the “Prince\$\$ of the R\$\$.” She faced protests again in April, when she joined a forum of presidential candidates at Southern Texas University in Houston. Outside the historically black university, protesters waved signs claiming she was the “Mascot of India’s KKK.”



In March 2019, around two dozen Indian Americans protested outside the First Unitarian Church of Los Angeles, where Tulsi Gabbard was campaigning for Democratic Party's nomination for president.
COURTESY PIETER FRIEDRICH

Given the international attention she now enjoys, Gabbard speaks more reservedly when pressed for her opinion about Modi. In 2016, she told *Quartz* that “Modi impressed me,” calling him “a leader whose example and dedication to the people he serves should be an inspiration to elected officials everywhere.”

In May 2019, after the journalist Glenn Greenwald noted her “strong praise for Modi,” he asked Gabbard if she believes that “the government of India persecutes Muslims and other religious minorities.”

“I don’t pretend to support or approve of or endorse all the practices of the ruling party in India,” Gabbard replied.

Pressing her again, Greenwald asked, “Do you agree that that’s happening?” She responded, “I don’t dispute that these things are occurring.”

Just one month later, Gabbard was in New York for a fundraiser at the home of Raj Bhayani, a Brooklyn-based surgeon who is a member of the OFBJP’s social-development committee as well as a core-committee member of

ModiForPM.org. In April, he helped organise an OFB JP campaign kickoff for Modi's re-election this year.

Gabbard is investing all her efforts in her run for the presidency. Compared to the many heavyweights still in the race, she is ranked near the bottom. The party has set a combined polling and donation threshold for participation. Gabbard has qualified for the first two debates, but is struggling to meet the thresholds for the third. With luck, she may still stay the course until September.

In my conversations with Sangh leaders, I sensed some distancing from Gabbard when I spoke to them about her presidential campaign. Barai emphasised that he is an independent with no formal party affiliation. “I’ll wait till whoever comes into the primaries, and gets the party’s nomination, and then choose between the two,” he told me. In the crowded Democratic primary, he listed several contenders he favours: “Joe Biden, Kamala Harris or Tulsi Gabbard—but again, I will have to see what the Democratic Party puts up.”

Barai’s rhetoric diverges from his campaign donations. There are over twenty Democrats running for president, but the only one he has donated to is Gabbard. Since January this year, he and his wife have contributed \$6,400 to her campaign. Many of Gabbard’s other original Sangh donors, including Ramesh Shah, Shekar Reddy and Vijay, are also donating to her presidential campaign. Ramesh and Rishi Bhutada—along with their wives—have contributed \$10,900. Mihir Meghani, his wife and his parents have contributed \$22,400.

Even if she fails to win the presidency, Tulsi Gabbard’s future looks bright. She is positioned to run for the US Senate—or even secure a cabinet position. And besides, the Sangh is a gift that keeps giving.

Disclosure: The writer has participated in protests and organising for civil rights and minority causes in the United States, including with South Asian organisations opposing Hindutva.

Correction: An earlier version of this article mistakenly stated that Sina Gabbard recalled her brother's family prostrating themselves before an altar to Chris Butler. The article has been corrected to state that Sina recalled hearing of the family prostrating themselves at the feet of Butler.

The article also said that Tulsi Gabbard's parents were both Caucasians. Her father, Mike Gabbard, is, in fact, of European and Samoan descent.

The Caravan regrets the errors.

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